Lake Pepin Fish Crisis Called 'Major Problem

From Eau Claire Leader

WABASHA, Minn. — Wisconsin and Minnesota residents at a special meeting here Tuesday were told the troubled Lake Pepin fishery is a national problem requiring attention from Congress.

Officials likened the lake's problem of high concentrations of an industrial chemical in carp to the DDT crisis which affected sportfishing on Lake Michigan in the 1950s.

The Food and Drug Administration recently ordered a halt to interstate shipments of carp taken from Lake Pepin after sampling showed they contained up to 70 parts per million polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB).

PCBs are industrial chemicals which have been known to cause cancer and deformed births among laboratory animals tested at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The animals were fed a steady diet of PCBs and, over time, developed organ damage, skin lesions and were unable to reproduce.

The allowable federal level of PCB in fish is five parts per million. Officials said PCB detectable in the lake can be traced to Twin Cities industries 60 miles upstream.

FDA has said that a person would have to eat fish contaminated by PCB daily for three years for PCB to be measured in the human body.

The FDA ban has curtailed commercial fishing on the lake, a wide spot in the Mississippi River between Alma, Wis., and Red Wing, Minn., and forced a Pepin fish wholesaler to bury at least 80,000 lbs. of allegedly contaminated carp.

More than 80 persons, including about a dozen commercial fishermen from both states, crowded into the Wabasha middle school library for the meeting, which was sponsored by the Great River Environmental Action Team (GREAT) and the Southeastern Minnesota Assistance and Planning Organization. GREAT is a six-state agency funded by the federal government to develop a management policy for the Upper Mississippi River.

Joel Schilling of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA), said PCBs are chemically similar to DDT which has been banned from use in many areas.

He said up to 35 parts per billion PCB were found in tests of the river and noted that PCB concentrates as it moves up the food chain, with highest levels being found in game fish in the river.

Restriction expected

Bruce Hawkinson, a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources fish manager at Lake City, Minn., said recent samples of game fish from Lake Pepin are being analysed by four agencies. He predicted, though, there will be a statement forthcoming soon from both states urging restricted consumption of game fish taken by sportfishermen on the lake.

The PCB concentrations are confined to the Lake Pepin area, which acts as a settling basin on the river. PCB levels are below federal levels from Alma downstream, officials said.

Schilling appealed to the group to put pressure on state legislators to build support for restricted use and greater controls on the manufacture of PCB. He said the states are powerless to ban the spread of PCB in the environment.

Thus far, Schilling said, the PCA and other researchers have been unable to pinpoint the source of PCB in the river. PCA has two persons analyzing the river at potential discharge sites.

"We are moving as rapidly as we can," he said.

Monsanto Chemical Corp., St. Louis, Mo., is the only U.S. manufacturer of PCB and an Italian firm imports it to this country, Schilling said.

PCB sources

He said it is a nonflammable fluid used as insulation in transformers, heat exchangers and hydraulic equipment. Another major source is landfills. Smaller quantities may also be present in ink, he said. PCB wasn't known to be in the river until 1970.

Schilling mentioned that discharge points near 3-M Chemolite at Cottage Grove, Minn., a tanning firm at Red Wing, Minn. and several refineries near the Minneapolis-St. Paul area were tested since higher PCB levels were discovered in the river.

"We think it may be a large discharge accounting for that size of concentration," Schilling said. However, he said some industries may be discharging PCB at levels undetectable with present equipment and the PCB then is concentrating in Lake Pepin and its fishery.

Affect game fish

Although PCB can impair the reproductive capabilities of walleyes, the leading game fish on the river, there is no indication of that occurring at this time Hawkinson said.

He said PCB concentrates in the fatty tissue of fish and is found in greater amounts in larger fish. Cooking techniques would not reduce the PCB levels, he said, and half-lives of PCB are not known.

Although they had been invited to attend, officials of the FDA were not present at the meeting.

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