PCB sword still hangs heavy over commercial fishermen

By KETA STEEBS

"It's like throwing out the baby and keeping the bathwater," growled one weatherbeaten commercial fisherman following Wednesday's PCB hearing. His analogy, loosely interpreted, apparently equated the baby with fish and the bathwater with Lake Michigan.

There was, for the fishermen at least, nothing new at the hearing. It had been called by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture in cooperation with Elaine Johnson, secretary of the Northeastern Wisconsin Consumer Fisheries, and attracted speakers from the Department of Natural Resources, the Federal Food & Drug Administration and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture.

Because Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) are a highly stable toxic industrial chemical found particularly in the fat of fish, the fishermen were warned that the present acceptable level of five parts per million (5ppm) may soon be reduced to two.

The fishermen had already been alerted early in June by Tony Earl, secretary of the DNR, that the Food and Drug Administration was preparing to lower the 5 ppm to a much more restrictive 2 ppm. Because of the efforts of the local fishing association the policy makers took another look at the situation and decided to leave well enough alone — at least for the present. A nine-member PCB council was formed to study the problem in depth and Wednesday's meeting was an offshoot of the study.

Al Hoeting, district director of the FDA in Detroit, Mich., said the Monsanto Company of St. Louis, Mo., is the only producer of PCBs in the United States. Although the company's production has dropped from 70 million pounds of the toxic chemical in 1971 to 36 million pounds this year, about one billion pounds are still "in service." Monsanto has been manufacturing PCBs for the past 46 years.

The company has been ordered to cease PCB operations in 1977 but many of its products (fluorescent light fixtures, electric transformers, marine paints, hydraulic fluids, etc.) are being used daily and are not degradable. The fact that PCBs are so stable and enter the air through vaporization and the water through fallout poses long standing residue problems — especially in fish.

The public, therefore, has been urged to limit its fish intake to one meal a week and Hoeting suggests that the amount consumed each year shouldn't exceed 15 pounds. Pregnant women and those of child bearing age are warned to be even more careful in their diets.

This year, 10 years after being made aware of the PCB threat, the Wisconsin legislature has enacted a law which will regulate the purchase and sale of PCBs in this state. On the national level, however, producers of toxic substances will have three more years to operate before the PCB ban goes into effect.

Apparently finding it easier to control the consumer than the manufacturer, the FDA plans to strictly enforce the present allowable limit of 5 ppm in fish and warns that Canada has already restricted that limit to 2 ppm. The Great Lakes have been adversely affected by the PCB fallout for some time.

Local commercial fishermen, whose source of supply is Green bay and Lake Michigan, protested the methods currently being used to test the toxic content of fish saying that inedible portions (such as heads, bones, fat, etc.) are included in the analysis.

Jerry Myrdal, representing the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, admitted that both fat and skin are included in the testing but said that other than that only edible portions are used. The bigger, older and fatter the fish, the higher the PCB content, he warned.

Hoeting spent considerable time describing the effects of the Yusho (Japan) poisoning episode which took place in 1968 when a leaking heat exchanger discharged large quantities of PCBs in rice oil. About 1,000 persons showed signs of toxic poisoning and 17 died from various malignancies. Hoeting said a recent Michigan study of 182 persons showed that heavy fish eaters had higher levels of PCBs in their body fat than light eaters and were exposed to more adverse effects.

After dwelling on the dire effects of over-consumption Hoeting said he himself planned to continue eating 15 pounds of fish per year and will serve it on his dinner table even though he does have a young daughter who may be bearing children within the next decade.

When asked if he personally was aware of anyone who died from eating fish, the FDA man smiled and said, "No, next question please."

Elaine Johnson noted that tests authorized and paid for by the commercial fishing association and conducted under approved laboratory conditions showed that food products containing the highest PCB concentrate were chicken, pork, whipping cream and liver. She also pointed out that the majority of fish now being tested are game fish, not sold on the commercial market, such as coho, chinook and Lake trout. These species all proved high in PCB content but because they are caught by sport fishermen the FDA has no control over them.

The fishermen asked if beef, dairy products, eggs, grains and other foods are being subjected to the same minute examination given fish and were assured that all foods are subjected to rigorous analysis.

Myrdahl said extensive tests are also being taken on carp. Described as a "rough fish" limited in its sales appeal, carp have been analysed raw, smoked, trimmed, untrimmed, belly-up and belly-down but the PCB content remains about the same. Six average size carp, recently treated and examined in a laboratory, showed a PCB content of 40 to 50 ppm.

Henry Roberts, another FDA representative, spoke of law enforcement. Dressed entirely in judicial black and resembling a 19th century marshall more than a 20th century lawman, Roberts assured his audience that he was a stickler for law enforcement.

"I can be a kind soul, I can bend over backwards if someone makes an honest mistake," he said bluntly. "But, I warn you, if I catch fish being sold over the guidelines inter-state, I can assure you of quick action. I will not only seize the contraband I will take immediate action against the shipper."

One fisherman asked plaintively, "If you plan on raising so much hell with the fishermen, why don't you raise hell with the people who are polluting our waters?"

Roberts hesitated a moment before replying, "I don't have jurisdiction over them."

When asked why it was taking so long to ban the manufacture and sale of PCBs, Roberts said simply, "Bureaucrats and politics."

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