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No Weiss Lake restrictions seen with new PCB standard

MONTGOMERY — A recent change in federal regulations that lowers the levels of a chemical pollutant allowed in fish transported across state lines will not mean restrictions on fishing at Weiss Lake in Cherokee County, state health officials say.

The Food and Drug Administration has lowered the allowable level of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) in fish from five parts per million to two parts per million.

Though the PCB level in some Weiss Lake fish may exceed that amount, the State Public Health Department does not plan to issue any new warnings or restrict fishing in the area, said department spokesman Rod Douglas.

State health officials still maintain that the level of PCB contamination in the reservoir to be harmful to humans, said W.T. Willis, state director of environmental health.

"The FDA's new regulations are really meant to apply to the Hudson River (in New York) and the Great Lakes, where the PCB levels are much higher," said Willis.

In laboratory tests, PCBs have been known to cause cancer in rats.

In 1976, a group of citizens, many of them Cherokee Countians, filed a class action suit against two industries in connection with the pollution of Weiss Lake. The plaintiffs — many of whom own businesses on the lakefront — say the discharge of PCBs into the Coosa River by a General Electric plant near Rome, Ga., has adversely affected their ability to earn a living. Weiss Lake feeds from the Coosa River.

The suit, which asks perhaps the largest damages of any suit filed in Alabama history —$1 billion — also names Monsanto Corp. as a defendant. Monsanto is the firm which manufactured and sold the PCBs to GE.

Depositions are still being taken in the case, said a spokesman in the U.S. District Court clerk's office in Birmingham. No date has been set for a pre-trial proceeding, the spokesman said.

In addition to the class action, the State of Alabama intervened in the case. Former state Attorney General Bill Baxley asked compensatory damages of $1 million for the state plus $100,000 in punitive damages.