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Lake States Asking Ban Against Contaminant PCB

Grand Rapids Press Bureau

LANSING — Because of continued high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the Great Lakes, a group representing Michigan and three other states has asked the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to seek a nationwide ban on the sale, distribution and use of PCBs.

The chemicals have widespread use in household products from paper to handsoap, as well as heavy industry application.

The request was made to Francis Mayo, Chicago, administrator of the EPA's Region V, which includes the Great Lakes states.

The EPA also was asked to explore the possibility of using environmentally safe substitutes for PCBs.

The recommendation to Mayo was made by the new Lake Michigan Toxic Substance Committee, which is comprised of representives from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Great Lakes Laboratory and the EPA.

The committee studied the PCB situation after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) seized several Lake Michigan fish shipments for having PCB concentrations above the levels permitted by the FDA. Donald Healton, Great Lakes regional director for the FDA, also had declared that interstate shipments of Great Lakes fish would be halted this year if significantly high levels of PCBs were found. He termed the content in Lake Michigan chubs, coho salmon and lake trout "dangerously high."

Dr. Howard A. Tanner, director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), has written Mayo asking what he proposes to do in response to the committee request. And DNR officials have met with the EPA in Washington, D.C.

William G. Turney, chief of the DNR's Bureau of Water Management, told the State Natural Resources Commission Thursday that EPA officials "appreciate" the problem but really don't know what to do about it.

Turney said there is some question

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Great Lakes States Seek Ban on PCB

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whether EPA has the authority to call such a ban.

As a result, Turney said, any immediate ban probably will have to be pursued at the state level.

PCBs remain high despite the fact that the Monsanto Chemical Co., sole U.S. producer, said a few years ago that it would discontinue sales for use as hydraulic and heat-transfer fluids.

And Turney said dieldrin continues as a "nagging" problem. Dieldrin, used in southwestern Michigan in 1971, still is leaching into state waters, he said.

In April, Turney said, the FDA made its first seizure of fish from Michigan waters because of contamination from dieldrin. Most production of dieldrin and aldrin was suspended by the EPA last August, Turney said. It made exceptions for three minor uses. The chemicals were placed in restricted-use categories by Michigan and Wisconsin about three years ago, he explained.

But he believes PCBs represent a serious problem, in view of the fact voluntary restrictions on certain uses have not changed the level of contamination in state waters.

A survey of 39 Michigan industries in 1974 confirmed that its use is diverse, 20 different products being identified as containing PCBs. It proves that the restrictions have not been effective in lowering the contamination, Turney said.

PCBs, on the contrary, have been discovered to be ubiquitous pollutants, he said. The chemical has been found even in snowfall in Wisconsin, he pointed out. It has caused reproductive failures among herring gulls around Lake Ontario and in commercially raised mink fed Lake Michigan salmon. It also has been associated with reproductive failures of fish.

Surveys of about 60 municipal wastewater treatment plants show that effluent from such plants is the major "point source" of PCB discharges to surface waters.

Finding of PCBs in fish and wildlife in remote places, he said, indicates that the contaminates are transported by air — as shown by the polluted Wisconsin snowfall. The atmospheric contribution to Lake Michigan could be very significant, Turney believes.

One of the serious problems posed with regard to ridding the environment of PCBs, Turney reported, is the difficulty of disposing of carrier fluids.

It requires at least 2,000 degrees of heat for four seconds to incinerate PCBs, he explained. And scrubbing devices must be attached to clean the air of hydrochloric acid in the product of such combustion. No incinerators have been cleared in Michigan for PCB disposal, he said.

Monsanto will dispose of them, but the cost is so high that industry is loath to ship its waste PCB liquids to the company.

Many industries add PCB wastes to other oils and dispose of them through waste haulers. Since waste oils are reclaimed, Turney said, this practice merely leads to recycling the PCBs. In some cases the PCBs get back into the environment when the waste oils are used for dust control or are burned in unapproved incinerators and boilers, he explained.