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Hearings on Preventing PCB Spills Under Way

WASHINGTON, D. C. — Hearings went into their second day today on the effects of spills of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into waters of the United States. The oversight and investigative hearings by a subcommittee of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee will conclude Friday, according to a member of the panel, Rep. Philip E. Ruppe (R-Houghton).

The panel is attempting to find out what has been done to stop the spread of PCBs and draft ideas for legislative solutions to prevent their continued use, Ruppe said.

PCBs are fire resistant solutions used as insulating agents in electrical equipment, especially high power transformers. PCBs enter the environment through accidental spillage into streams, lakes and other waters and seepage from landfills.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that over 12 million pounds of PCB is introduced into the environment annually.

The problem occurs when PCBs are consumed by fish, later to enter the human food cycle. Fish in several bodies of water carry concentrations about five parts per million, the safe level suggested by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

"The PCB contamination of fish poses a severe threat to the commercial and sport fishing of the Great Lakes, the Hudson River, the Upper Mississippi River and southern California areas of the Pacific Ocean," Ruppe said.

"I am pleased EPA finally moved to meet this threat to public health," he continued, "but I am convinced that we need to do more than merely eliminate the continued, albeit accidental, discharge of PCBs into this nation's waterways."

Testimony will be offered by EPA Administrator Russell Train.

Late last month, Train announced a seven-point "emergency" plan to combat PCB contamination.

During Friday hearings a spokesman for the State of Michigan's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will testify on regulatory efforts underway in that state. Michigan DNR officials have been highly critical of EPA's reluctance to take action against the use of PCBs.

Tentatively scheduled to appear today before the House panel is Donald Parejko, Northern Michigan University.

Parejko recently announced the results of studies of tissue samples taken from Lake Superior fish. The biologist found that some lake trout contain three times the amount of PCBs recommended by the FDA.

Ruppe said he would seek testimony from witnesses on whether there are methods available or under study to leach PCBs from the tissues of fish.

"The danger of consuming PCB-contaminated fish is not going to go away in the near future," Ruppe said, "but we can explore ways to diminish the impact."

Ruppe noted the chemical similarity of PCBs and the chemical poly brominate biphenyl (PBB) which has contaminated thousands of head of Michigan livestock.

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