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Toxic Chemical Is Found in Fish From Delaware River

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Quantities of a highly toxic chemical, similar in some respects to DDT, have been found in fish samples taken from the Delaware River.

And although the Delaware test results by themselves are not alarming, they do indicate a "problem," officials say.

In all, a total of 27 fish — including catfish, brookland and perch — were analyzed for the chemical called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), in sections of the river south of Trenton as the result of the Delaware Bay.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials said more fish samples will be taken in the Delaware, along with water samples near industrial users of PCBs.

Philadelphia's drinking water and discharges from the city's sewage treatment plants also will be tested.

Highly Toxic Chemical

The investigation for PCBs in the Delaware and other rivers throughout the nation was prompted by reports that the chemical could be highly toxic in relatively small quantities.

And like DDT, the chemical accumulates in the environment and

doesn't break down.

In laboratory animals the chemical has caused liver cancer and reproductive failure. Humans who have been exposed to the chemical have complained of skin infections, rashes, dizziness, eye and nasal irritation, autoimmune hepatitis and a painful form of acne.

In 1968, more than 1,000 Japanese were exposed to PCBs after eating contaminated rice. Children born to mothers who had eaten the rice were smaller than average and had discolored skin.

An EPA spokesman said the Delaware tests could mean bad news for fishing enthusiasts.

Contamination of Fish

"It demonstrates that there is a contamination of certain fish resulting from the discharge of PCBs into the Delaware," said regional EPA Administrator Daniel J. Snyder.

"We are seeing an indication that commercial and recreational fishing in the Delaware estuary may be affected unless something is done to restrict the chemical," he added.

The tests found PCBs in fish samples ranging from .75 parts per million to 2.5 parts per million.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration considers a concentration of more than 5 parts per million in foods unsuitable while in Canada the limit is 2 parts per million.

But Snyder said the U.S. is considering changing standards to Canadian levels.

Surveys Needed

"One thing that should be pointed out," Snyder continued, "We don't

know at this time if these levels found in the Delaware fish are an average, a minimum or the maximum that could be found.

"The only way we'll know that is through more extensive surveys."

So far, the environmental agency has found 10 companies in the Delaware River basin that could be discharging PCBs.

These companies include: Conover, Bethlehem, Pa.; McCabe Co., Philadelphia; Bell Telephone, Allentown; High Energy Co., Malvern; Westinghouse, Philadelphia; General Electric,

Phila.; and Westinghouse Electric in Reading, Allentown, King of Prussia and Folcroft.

Each of these companies have the chemical directly or indirectly from Monsanto Corp., the country's only manufacturer of PCBs.

Used in Transformers

PCBs are used by the electrical industry for large transformers. They are also used in plasticizers, hydraulic fluids, diffusion pump oils, wax additives and carbonless carbon paper.

"We haven't got any real bad actors here," said William Reilly, deputy director for enforcement with EPA. "But we have encountered a number of sources that have poor housekeeping, who haven't been attentive about keeping PCBs from getting into the environment."

The EPA tests of the Delaware are part of a nationwide program to determine the levels of PCBs in the environment.

The program began after heavy concentrations of the chemical were found in eels and striped bass in the Hudson River and Lake Ontario; in other fish and wildlife in rivers through the Northeast and Midwest; in starlings across the nation, and in ducks in the Atlantic and Mississippi migration flyways.