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Public hearings ordered on PCBs

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MADISON — The state Board of Natural Resources Thursday ordered public hearings on proposals to prohibit the uses of industrial chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) or to authorize their use only under strict regulation and in severely limited quantities.

The materials are absorbed in the tissues of fish and are dangerous to human health, according to technical findings. Federal food and drug authorities have impounded some fish catches recently because of the PCB problem.

The chemical is widely used in industry, and notably in electrical generating plants. The materials are typically found in waste paper dispatched for recycling, and thus any state control would immediately affect several major Fox Valley paper recycling enterprises, observers said.

Even some of the more mild controls that have been proposed could probably not be accommodated by waste paper recycling operations as now conducted, one state technician said.

Board member, several of whom are new to their seats, disputed spiritedly about proposing a total prohibition on the use of the material, or imposing limits in parts per million of waste water discharges.

A department technician said the material is being discharged into public waters from other than industrial sources, and said such residues are so abundant that even snow melt contains them.

Discussion showed that the state of technical knowledge about alternatives is apparently sparse. But members of the board were told that Sweden and Japan have acted to enact controls.

"We must rattle the cage too," remarked Lawrence Dahl of Tigerton, a board member, as he heard reservations about the right of the state to act if technicians cannot recommend other replacement materials to industry.

The board authorized the public hearings by a vote of four to two. John Brogan of Green Bay, attending his second meeting as a member, abstained. He had earlier put into the record the fact of his stock holdings in the Fort Howard Paper Company of Green Bay.

Clifford Messinger, a new board member, said the state should lead in the effort to indentify alternate materials for industry.

The public hearings would be preliminary to a proposal for action by the state legislature.

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