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Reports sharp DDT drop in Lake Michigan fish

By Bruce Ingersoll

DDT levels in Lake Michigan fish have taken a sharp and surprisingly sudden drop since 1970, as Ann Arbor (Mich) biologist told a gathering of conservationists and antipollution officials here Friday.

The suddenness of the decline is baffling, said Robert Reinert, a researcher at the Great Lakes Fishery Laboratory, but it may augur well for the lake's future.

In sounding what he called a "cheery note," Reinert said few scientists, if any, had expected DDT levels in coho salmon, lake trout and chubs to fall so quickly after DDT was outlawed in 1970.

"Many people argued against banning DDT because it would take 100 years for the DDT in the lake to go away," Reinert told the daylong conference at the Sheraton-Chicago Hotel.

"In fact, one year after the ban, DDT levels started to go

down and have continued to go down," he said.

The average salmon, for example, contained 11.8 parts per million of DDT in 1969. By 1973, the level of contamination had dropped to 4.5 ppm, he said.

In view of the "rise and fall of DDT," Reinert said he expected the levels of other industrial compounds in Lake Michigan fish to take a similar drop.

However, the use of these compounds — polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — has been sharply limited only since 1972, he pointed out.

The average coho salmon — which he advocated watching just as coal miners once watched pet canaries for the first trace of mine gas — is tainted with 12 ppm of PCBs, he said.

Another encouraging report, on the removal of phosphorus from sewage effluent, was given by Valdas Adamkus, deputy regional administrator for the

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

By the end of 1974, phosphorus was being removed from 63 per cent of the treated sewage going into the lake, he said. By the end of this year, the figure will be 75 per cent.

The original goal had been 80-per cent removal by the end of 1972, Adamkus noted, "but still we have come a long way."

The conference, sponsored by the Lake Michigan Federation to make an ecological diagnosis of the current state of the lake's health, also heard several disquieting reports:

- Atmospheric fallout appears to be a source of PCB and asbestos pollution. And 12 per cent of the phosphorus going into the lake is airborne, said

Thomas J. Murphy, a De Paul University researcher.

- Little has been done about waste discharges from vessels.
- Harbor dredging by the

Army Corps of Engineers is polluting shore waters.

- Shore erosion continues to be aggravated by the high lake level.