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Agency takes steps against major pollutant of nation's waterways

By Robert Signer
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WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency has taken the first step toward preventing further pollution of U.S. waterways by PCBs, a major industrial pollutant.

The federal agency announced it will hold a hearing Aug. 20 on proposed regulations that would ban or limit the discharge of PCBs into waterways by industry.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are used in the manufacture of capacitors, transformers and other industrial products in the United States and many other countries.

They are similar to DDT in chemical construction, are not readily biodegradable and have a long and durable lifetime.

State and federal laboratory tests have linked PCBs to a variety of human illnesses from skin lesions to miscarriages. In a broader sense, they affect the chain of life, first contaminating basic foods and then invading human body fat and remaining there.

The EPA proposed specifically that all industries manufacturing the chemicals be prohibited from discharging any PCBs.

It also proposed that plants that use PCBs to produce electrical transformers and capacitors be barred from discharging the chemicals in most wastes resulting from the manufacturing process. Other limits would be set on the discharge of PCBs into waterways from plant operations.

Lake Michigan is the most severely contaminated of the Great Lakes in terms of PCB levels. Concentrations of up to 165 parts per million trout have been found.

The Food and Drug Administration has set a maximum level of 5 parts per million of PCBs in fish and has been criticized by some environmental and health groups for permitting even that much.

Generally, the Lake Michigan concentration of PCBs is below 10 parts per million, an Interior Department spokesman said. In smelt and lake trout, the range of PCB residue in the lake has been from 2.5 parts per million to 165 parts per million respectively.

EPA specialists acknowledged that no immediate benefits could be expected. The regulations will not take effect until a full year after being issued in final form — and that process could take six months.

Monsanto Industrial Chemicals Co., with headquarters in St. Louis, is the only producer of PCBs. The company said in January that it will phase out production after the industry makes arrangements for alternative materials.

Therein lies a critical problem. No substitute has been fully acceptable to date. Last month the EPA said that a fluid called polydimethylsiloxane was "far preferable" to PCBs for use in transformers from the environmental viewpoint.