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PCB levels threaten fishing in Great Lakes

Chicago (AP)

Experts say that although contamination by toxic chemicals known as PCBs is being felt most severely in the Great Lakes and the Hudson River, the pollution rapidly is becoming a nationwide threat to fisheries, wildlife and human health.

Nathaniel P. Reed, assistant secretary of Interior, said Friday the chemicals already have so polluted the Great Lakes that imposition by the Food and Drug Administration of lower — and safer — allowable PCB levels in fish could end all commercial fishing in the region, currently a $96 million annual industry.

He also warned that PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, could cause the imminent collapse of the $300 million-a-year sports fishing-based tourist industry in the Upper Great Lakes.

Such a reduction in allowable PCB levels in fish sold for fod already is under consideration.

Reed told the National Conference on Polychlorinated Biphenyls that the nation must respond immediately to the dangers raised by the chemicals, since "They represent a ubiquitous degenerative influence on our national health and well being."

PCBs, which chemically resemble DDT, were developed in the 1930s for use in products ranging from hydraulic fluids to carbonless copying paper and textile sealants.

Because of earlier environmental concern, however, their sole U.S. producer, the Monsanto Corp., in 1971 limited its sales to the manufacturers of electrical transformers and capacitors.

Nonetheless, Reed said, extensive tests have found traces of PCBs in fish from every major U.S. watershed, including such rivers as the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Columbia, Sacramento, Rio Grande, Connecticut, Merrimac and even the Yukon in Alaska. He said PCB also has been found in almost all bird samples taken since 1970.

Reed said he supports a "national ban on all domestic and imported PCBs destined for use other than in transformers and capacitors."

Spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc., went even further in their denunciation of the chemicals, calling for the complete phase-out of all PCB manufacture and use. The council also called for a complete ban on the import and export of PCBs.

Reed and others expressed concern that, while DDT levels in affected waters have dropped more rapidly than expected in the past several years, PCB levels have not dropped at all.

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