Who Dumped The PCB In Lake Pepin?

By KEN BROWN
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WABASHA, Minn. — Who put the polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) in Lake Pepin that has contaminated 60,000 pounds of carp is as big a mystery as who put the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder, but nobody is laughing.

Commercial fishermen, residents and sport fishermen that use and live along the lake are looking for answers, but were told last night by Joel Schilling, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency lake survey unit director, that the answers may be a long time in coming.

The basic problem is that a small amount of the industrial chemical that has the characteristics of DDT magnifies in the food chains that fish depend on. He said small organisms such as freshwater shrimp have the ability to take low concentrations of the chemical into their system. As minnows feed on these the chemical is concentrated in their bodies which in turn is passed onto the larger fish that feed on them.

"Even if the use of PCBs were halted tomorrow, there is probably enough of it in the environment so that it would be around for a long time," he said.

Just how long Schilling said he was unable to predict because its half life has never been established.

The chemical is used as an insulator in transformers, in hydraulic fluids and possibly newsprint, Schilling said. The highest concentration was found on March 18 in Lake Pepin. Since that time, he said, that PCA has established a program to identify the source, but thus far have not found discharges at Red Wing or Cottage Grove where discharges were found in the past.

Two things that have been established are:

• Monsanto of St. Louis, Mo., is the only domestic manufacturer of the chemical, although some may be imported from an Italian firm.

• Monsanto reports it has restricted the sale of the product since 1972 when 5,000 pounds of it were sold.

Schilling said the PCBs are similar to DDT in that they concentrate in the fatty tissue of fish. He said while the high concentration was found by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 20,000 pounds of carp fillets shipped to Buffalo, N.Y., game fish have residues of the chemical.

Willis Mattison, Rochester, Minn., PCA regional director, that that primates, or monkeys, fed a continuous diet containing five parts per million (ppm) of PCBs in a University of Wisconsin-Madison experiment, developed skin lesions and had stillborn offspring. The few ppm is the present level allowed by the FDA in fish entering interstate commerce.

The carp shipped from Lake Pepin to Buffalo were reported to have levels of six to 10 ppm, and an additional 40,000 pounds as high as 25 ppm. All of the fish were buried.

Another possible effect that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has found is that the chemical may impair the reproduction in walleyes, Mattison said.

Of the approximately 70 persons attending the meeting sponsored jointly the Southeastern Minnesota Assistance and Planning Organization (SEMAPO) and the Great River Environmental Action Team (GREAT), 11 identified themselves as commercial fishermen, 15 or 20 as residents along the lake, and the remainder as sport fishermen.

A consensus was that the PCB is a national problem, not one for the individual states. Schilling and Mattison agreed with Mattison pointing out that now is the time to conduct numbers and compensation because a hazardous substance bill is being considered.

As to why carp or commercial fish receive most of the attention and game fish are ignored, Schilling explained the former enter interstate commerce while game fish don't. He said the Supreme Court defined the PCBs as a food additive which enable the FDA to obtain jurisdiction over fish contaminated with them.

Another sobering aspect is that PCB settling on the bottom of the lake may be put into suspension again by dredging or disturbance by towboats, Schilling said.

He said four laboratories are analyzing samples of fish collected from the Lake Pepin on Friday, using the same techniques and all getting parts of the same fish so the data gathered from the analysis has a broader base.

He said the PCA is moving as rapidly as it can, adding the most important thing is to find the source from which the PCBs are coming.

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