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## Southwest Gripped By PCB Score

ATLANTA (AP) — In the early 1970s, it was learned that certain chemical compounds — polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — were dangerous to the environment and the federal government ordered industries to stop using them except in closed systems.

But recently, as rapid-fire surveillance, federal and state officials in Georgia and South Carolina have ordered halts to commercial fishing in some lakes and rivers in those states because fish caught in them contained more PCBs than was considered safe.

The restrictions — coupled with warnings against eating fish from those lakes and rivers — have inspired officials in other southeastern states to check for the presence of PCBs in fish caught in their state waters.

Thus far, though fish caught in some other states — notably Alabama — have been found to have high levels of PCBs, only Georgia and South Carolina have been hit with fishing restrictions.

Howard Zeller, deputy director of the Environmental Protection Agency's enforcement division at its regional office in Atlanta, says the EPA found the Georgia and South Carolina PCB violations through a program to find possible violations of PCBs and their analogs in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Florida, North and South Carolina.

Thus far, excessive amounts of PCBs have been confirmed in fish caught in Lake Hartwell on the Georgia-South Carolina border and Coosa River and two tributaries running into it.

Preliminary studies also have shown there may be a PCB problem in Weiss Lake, an Alabama reservoir into which the Coosa flows, but Alabama officials have not restricted fishing in that lake.

The problem with PCBs, which can cause skin eruptions, excessive eye discharges, swelling of eyelids in humans and possibly cancer, is that they are not biodegradable, and therefore stay in the environment, officials said.

Before the federal government placed restrictions on their use in the early 1970s, PCBs were used in a host of products, including paint and paper, Zeller said. "There are very, very low levels of PCBs just about anywhere you look... They're very cautious," he said.

After the ban, they were supposed to be used only in systems from which they would not be discharged.

EPA officials say that two companies now using PCBs in the manufacture of electrical components, General Electric Co. in Rome, Ga., and Sargent Electric Co. in Florence, S.C., are the source of the PCBs contaminating fish in the Coosa River and Lake Hartwell.

But officials have not charged that either company discharged excessive amounts of the chemical. In fact, after Sargento stopped dumping wastewater into a PCB-con-

taminated water treatment in Rome, the discharge rate of PCBs in the legend tripled in two weeks, officials said.

Federal and state officials are trying to determine what caused the increase.

What we are testing here is the result of spills of PCBs over a number of years, said Gil Johnston of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

"This is not something that happened at the General Electric plant two weeks ago."

The problem is that when even a small amount of the chemical gets into the environment, it stays and eventually builds up, Zeller said.

PCBs settle in sediment on the bottoms of lakes and rivers, he said.

"They organisms take it in, then they're eaten by a little bit bigger one, and then fish eat the little fish," Zeller said. "You take a very small amount that was on the bottom and build it up and it's magnified in the higher animals."

Zeller said the danger from PCBs is in the consumption of fish contaminated with them, and not in the lake or river water itself. Practically no PCBs have been found in the restricted waters, he said.

And, he said, the consumption of a few contaminated fish poses no real problem either. But when a person eats a lot of contaminated fish, and other foods containing PCBs, there's a potential for a buildup, he said.

Indeed, Alabama officials do not appear too concerned about the health threat of PCBs, despite the discovery of high amounts of them in some kinds of fish in Weiss Lake.

Given the current dietary habits of the people of Alabama and the evidence directly linking PCB with adverse effects on human health, no additional action is warranted at this time, Dr. Ira L. Myers, state health officer, said of the Weiss contamination.

For some persons, however, the ill effects of eating contaminated fish are not their most vocal concern.

Fishermen, businessmen and property owners on Lake Hartwell and Coosa River say that they have been hurt financially by the fishing ban, and in some rate actions they file suits against Sargento Electric and General Electric.

Fourteen property owners along Lake Hartwell have filed a \$1 billion class-action suit against Sargento and the Sargento Co., claiming that PCB contamination of Lake Hartwell fish was hurt business and reduced property values on the lakefront.

The property owners' attorney said Monsanto should be named liable because it produced the PCBs used by Sargento.

Attorneys representing fishermen, businessmen and property owners from Georgia and Alabama on the Coosa River have filed a suit naming suit against General Electric and Monsanto.