The Birmingham News
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.
D. 170,120 SUN. 210,250

NOV 21 1976

HURTING BUSINESS

Weiss a ghost lake from PCB plague

BY OLIVIA BARTON
News staff writer

CEDAR BLUFF—Fishing boats sit high and dry on the lakeshore, like pieces of driftwood washed up and abandoned in the sun.

The marina tackle shop is padlocked, silent except for the soft whirring of a motor on the minnow tank. A nearby cafe, its counters stocked with potato chips and candy, is empty.

The marina owner, Tommy Oliver, has been out picking cotton with a neighbor all day. This time last year, Oliver was too busy to think about cotton, much less pick it.

IN A SMALL country store, Harold Gilliam warms his backside near a wood-burning stove and shakes his head when he talks about business.

Although a homemade wooden sign outside says the store sells minnows and bait, Gilliam has sold only four boxes of worms in three weeks, and his minnow tank is dry.

Gilliam says Cedar Bluff has become a ghost town.

Why would people, especially fishermen, who normally flock to the mountain-studded Weiss Lake at Cedar Bluff, suddenly vanish, leaving the lake bootless and the one-stoplight town empty?

The answer is hard for the local marina and store owners to swallow. But it's something they've seen coming—like a plague—for two months now.

IN EARLY September, the Coosa River was closed to fishermen in Georgia, from Rome to the Alabama state line. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources issued a warning not to eat fish from the river, because high levels of a chemical called PCB had been round in them.

PCB, initials standing for polychlorinated biphenyls, is a chemical used in an insulating fluid that General Electric Co. in Rome puts in transformers, according to Bill Buchanan, GE community relations officer in Rome.

GE has been sued by bait and tackle store owners in Georgia, said Buchanan, because PCBs in the soil where the company dumped the fluid have washed into the river from a drainage ditch and small creek.

The company now has concreted the runoff area and roofed storage areas to prevent further leakage, said Buchanan.

The U. S. Food and Drug Administration, which found PCB can cause liver cancer in mice, has set limits on the amount of PCBs permissible in fish that

Turn to page A-2, column 1

MONS 050943



News staff photo—Olivia Barton

FISHERMEN STOPPED COMING TO MOUNTAIN-STUDDED WEISS LAKE
. . .Marina owner Oliver surveys empty lake after day of picking cotton

PCB ruining business

Continued from Page 1

are to be eaten: five parts per million.

Fish from the upper Coosa have 10 times and more than the limit of PCB allowed by FDA, according to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials.

Once PCB gets in the water, it settles to the bottom and can get into plants, eaten by insects, then minnows and on up in the food chain into larger fish which may be eaten by people, according to Howard Zeller, EPA deputy chief of enforcement.

PCB accumulates in the body tissue of humans, and does not go away, said Zeller.

"Eating fish with high PCB content is like smoking cigarettes. Maybe you'll get cancer, maybe not," said Zeller.

WHEN THE Coosa was closed to fishing in Georgia, Alabama immediately was notified about Weiss Lake, which the river feeds.

Tests done by the Alabama Water Improvement Commission and the Pesticide Lab at Auburn showed concentrations of PCBs in Weiss Lake fish "considerably in excess" of the FDA limit, according to State Health Officer Dr. Ira Myers.

But, Myers stopped short of closing the lake as the Georgia Natural Resources Department had done at Rome.

"Dr. Myers doesn't consider it a serious enough public health problem to close the lake," said W.T. Willis, director of the State Health Department's Environmental Health Division.

Myers said as long as people aren't on a "heavy diet of catfish" from Weiss, there is no need to worry about eating the fish, said Willis. A heavy diet, he said, is eating catfish three times a day, seven days a week.

EPA issued an advisory against eating fish from the lake, especially catfish, because of the chemical's tendency to accumulate, said Zeller. PCB levels were extremely high in catfish, and lowest in crappie, he said.

And with the river closed to fishing in Georgia, people like Stump Williams, whose livelihood depends on fishermen coming to his Cherokee Camper Site on the lake, aren't going to "experiment with eating the fish."

Williams privately hired chemists to test the fish in Weiss, and from those



GILLIAM



SHARP

samples was convinced "the fish are in pretty bad shape."

But are they safe to eat? "EPA says don't eat them and Dr. Myers says don't eat too many of them. Now we're tired of that stuff. We want straight facts," said Williams.

THE PROBLEM boils down to a rift between EPA and the Alabama Health Department.

"It's an unusual situation, with differing opinions from different people," said Willis. "It never should have gotten to this stage, and we don't know how to get out of it."

EPA says it's not trying to close the lake, but only wants to warn people about the potential danger of PCBs.

Closing Weiss Lake as Georgia closed the Coosa River presents a legal question to the Health Department officials, who say they would need a legal reason to re-open it.

"We would have to know that all the fish had PCBs below the limit. It could be more than 30 to 15 years from now," said Willis. "This is serious. It's not like something that will pass through in a short time."

"We'll bankrupt everybody on the lake if Dr. Myers closes it down to fishing," said Williams.

BUT, FISHING tackle business in Cherokee County already has plummeted 30 per cent, according to tackle shop and grocery store owner Tom Harton. Other sales are down a fourth, he said.

The PCB scare has kept away fishermen, said Harton, even the ones who toss back what they catch.

While GE has made plans to discontinue using PCBs by June 30, 1977, according to Buchanan, and Monsanto, the nation's sole supplier of PCBs, says it plans to stop producing the chemical by Oct. 31, 1977, Cedar Bluff residents want to know what's down the road for them.

"We built our business up from honeysuckle and briers. Now, it's going down and it's gotten us all upset," said Harton. "The county could lose $20 million in revenues."

Even the bread deliveryman said his business is affected. "I'm wondering who's going to eat those 200 cakes I've just brought in," he said.

Commerical fishermen like Arnol Sharp who have fished Weiss for seven years and sold their catch in Guntersville, are looking for other jobs and other places to fish.

SHARP WONDERS, though, if PCBs won't follow him down river to Gadsden, Neely Henry Lake and Logan Martin.

Weiss Dam works as a trap to collect PCB-laden sediment, and may halt the flow of PCB there.

But will it? "I can't tell you," says Zeller. "I don't know what will happen."

MONS 050944