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Michigan Leads Way on PCBs

MICHIGAN soon will be one of the national leaders in responding to the threat of PCB-poisoned waters. Both the Senate and House now have unanimously passed Rep. David Bonior's PCB regulation bill, and it is headed for the governor's desk.

Passage of the Bonior bill not only directly benefits the water-surrounded peninsulas of Michigan, but sets an important precedent for other states and the national government. It could spur the adoption of Sen. Gaylord Nelson's proposed amendment to the Toxic Substances Control Bill that would specifically restrict and ultimately ban PCB use.

State and federal action cannot come too soon if there is to be any hope of containing the PCB peril. A joint Michigan-U.S. study released this month revealed that Lake Superior lake trout contained toxic materials exceeding minimum federal safety standards. Shore residents and tourist fishermen were warned not to eat lake trout more than once weekly, because of their PCB, DDT and mercury content.

The danger is becoming so acute that the federal Food and Drug Administration is considering lowering the permissible level of PCBs in fish to be eaten. Temporary FDA rules allow a PCB content of five parts per million, which many toxicologists find unrealistically high.

Canada last year set allowable levels at two parts per million, and the International Joint Commission that has watchdog responsibilities for the Great Lakes proposes a PCB objective of one-tenth part per million.

PCBs, when they were developed in the late 1920s, held the promise of providing a safe means for transferring heat in electrical equipment. The chemical compounds have since become a common ingredient in a plethora of household products.

Their early promise now has turned into a potential plague, however, and the nation must either respond or succumb to it. Fortunately, the Michigan Legislature has chosen the former course.

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