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Ernest Lyons' Column:

A New Bogey Is Poisoning U.S. Waters

OUR WATERS are threatened by an insidious new poison called PCBs, an abbreviation for polychlorinated biphenyls, a highly toxic industrial chemical related to DDT.

IT'S NOT exactly "new," having been produced and used in industry for the past 40 years. It first reared its ugly head as a menace to human life in 1968 when roughly 1,000 Japanese on the island of Kyushu were victims of what is now called "Yusho" disease. Some 15,000 were affected. They became seriously ill after using rice oil that had become contaminated during processing with an estimated 1,000 to 3,000 ppm of PCBs.

WHAT happened on a remote Japanese island nine years ago would seem to have little bearing on Florida and the rest of the United States today, but the awesome fact is that our fish and waterfowl are accumulating levels of PCBs far above a 1974 Food and Drug Administration ruling that the human tolerance for the contaminants is 5 ppm (five parts per million.)

THE FOOD FISH industry of the United States could be destroyed unless a way is found to end this contamination. Already the coho salmon and lake trout of the Great Lakes have been labeled unfit for human consumption because of high levels of PCBs in their flesh.

THE CHEMICALS are used as insulation in electrical transformers, in brake fluids, carbonless paper, copying inks, paints, recycled paper and soaps. At least 10 million pounds of PCBs are lost into the environment every year through vaporization, leaks and spills. They are "magnified" when ingested by small marine organisms, in turn eaten by minnows, in turn eaten by larger fish. They are even more resistant to degradation by natural forces than DDT.

SPEAKING at the Chicago conference on PBCs last November, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed declared, "I am troubled by the exceedingly high levels found in fish from all our drainage systems. And I do not mean just the Hudson and the Great Lakes system, but rivers on the Atlantic Coast, the Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio, the Columbia and the Sacramento, Rio Grande and other Gulf Coast streams — and even the Yukon of Alaska."

THE AUDUBON Society and the Izaak Walton League have warned their members nationwide that this is the new prime conservation menace, but most politicians have sat on their hands about it. One exception is Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin who has introduced legislation that would limit and ultimately ban use of the chemical.

STRIPED BASS in the Hudson River, a major spawning area, are so badly contaminated as to be unfit for food. Two General Electric plants on the upper Hudson, which manufacture capacitators, were dumping up to 90 pounds of PCBs per day into the river. Contaminated bass from this spawning source have been found up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

THERE are some signs of hope. The Great Lakes Basin Commission has recommended the immediate ban of non-essential use of PCBs and a complete ban when substitutes are found. Dow Chemical claims it has developed an environmentally safe substitute. Monsanto Corporation has cut back production for use only in "closed cycle" capacitators and transformers.

THE NATIONAL Fisheries Institute, Inc., representing hundreds of seafood producers, has asked for a nationwide ban because of the "potential risk to the American food supply."

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