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Danger Seen in a Lingering Chemical in Water

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BELLE GLADE — A new threat to animal and possibly human life has appeared in the form of a clear odorless liquid known as PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl), ecologist Arthur R. Marshall warned yesterday at a meeting of area residents who have formed a group known as "WATER."

Abnormally high levels of the chemical were discovered recently in four South Florida lakes and rivers including Lake Kissimmee and the West Palm Beach Canal, Marshall told representatives of Florida environmental and conservation groups at the conference which took place at the University of Florida Agricultural Research and Experiment Station here.

Although the highest levels of PCB in Florida and in the United States were found in the bed of the New River of Broward County, Marshall also expressed concern about the PCB found in Lake Kissimmee.

"What's to keep the chemicals from getting into Lake Okeechobee?" the ecologist asked.

With a few exceptions, PCB was banned in 1971 by the United States, but for 30 years the chemical was produced by Monsanto Chemical Co. for use in electrical transformers, insulation, inks, paints, motor oils and other common materials.

As is DDT, the chemical is a stable compound which will not degenerate for 100 years. The PBC already present poses a threat even if no new amounts are added, Marshall said.

Experiments have shown PCBs to be acutely toxic to oysters, shrimp and fish and the chemical recently has been linked to cancer in laboratory rats and mice, Marshall said.

Although he said there is no proof yet PCB is harmful to humans, he said he believes it eventually will prove to be hazardous to people as well as other animals.

"If my contentions are true, then we have some genuine problems. The effects could be gruesome," Marshall said.

Atty. Gen. Robert Shevin, who attended the meeting, said Florida must regain use of lost water resources and develop new ones.

"The problem is management, not abundance," according to Shevin, who said Florida's water resources are greater than those of any other state.

The attorney general said Florida's natural water sources have been depleted and polluted as a result of greed, ignorance and carelessness.

"We have always had a good supply of water, yet we are still faced with a water shortage," Shevin said.

Shevin expressed strong opposition to any plans to pump water from river and springs to supply large urban areas. He said there is a larger reservoir of water in the state's underground aquifer than in the above-ground supply.

"If we allow ourselves to start pumping water from hundreds of miles away from springs and rivers, we will have reached the point of no return. Then we can abandon Florida to the dust and winds," warned Shevin.