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PCB Breakthrough Seen

At the same time that state officials warned today of eating Sheboygan River fish for fear of PCB contamination, there was hope that Canadian researchers may have found a way of getting rid of the dreaded chemical.

According to Thomas Sheffy of the DNR hazardous drugs surveillance section at Madison, Canadian scientists have developed a bacteria that breaks down PCBs.

Until now, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have been regarded a non-biodegradable substance. They don't break down in water or under any natural conditions. Rather they stay around for decades.

That quality was the very reason why industry found PCBs to their liking. You can't burn or dissolve them. They resist heat and acids.

PCBs, developed by the Monsanto Company, were used from 1920 to 1960 before deleterious effects were discovered. Now there is concern nationwide that the substances have saturated the environment and may be capable of

causing acne, stomach disorders and loss of hair.

The warning against eating Sheboygan River fish, recently found to be the most highly PCB contaminated fish found in Wisconsin waters, specifically advises that lactating mothers, expectant mothers, females who anticipate bearing children, and children less than six years of age not eat these fish.

It recommends that nobody eat more than one meal or one-half pound of this fish per week.

PCBs have been used in manufacture transformers and capacitors. At Hudson Falls, N.Y., where a firm manufactures these products, they've found high PCB concentrations in fish.

The man-made chemical compound had been used in electrical wiring insulation, plasticizers, sealants, soldering waxes and a variety of materials until 1971 when the federal government restricted their use to closed containers for electrical equipment.

But by that time, millions of pounds of PCBs had been released to nature.

Along the Sheboygan River, PCBs were used for many years by die-cast foundries and in hydraulic fluids for die-cast molds.

Hopefully, the Canadian discovery of a bacteria that can break down PCBs will lead to the development of a substance to treat PCB contaminated waters, according to Sheffy.

The bacteria has been able to break down PCB contamination in sewage sludge but it has not yet been applied in a natural situation, such as a lake or river, Sheffy said.

"We hope they're on the verge of developing a product that will solve the PCB problem."

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