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US Help Urged on Pepin

Special to The Sentinel

Wabasha, Minn. — Wisconsin and Minnesota residents were told here that the troubled Lake Pepin fishery is a national problem requiring attention from Congress.

Officials likened the lake's problem of high concentration of an industrial chemical in carp to the DDT crisis that affected sports fishing on Lake Michigan in the 1960s.

The Food and Drug Administration recently ordered a halt to interstate shipments of carp taken from Lake Pepin, after sampling showed they contained up to 70 parts per million polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB). The chemical is known to cause cancer and deformed births among laboratory animals tested at the University of Wisconsin — Madison. The animals were fed a steady diet of PCB, and over a period developed organ damage, skin lesions and were unable to reproduce.

Allowable Level

The allowable federal level of PCB in fish is five parts per million. Officials said PCB detectable in the lake can be traced to Twin Cities industries 60 miles upstream.

More than 80 persons, including about a dozen commercial fishermen from Wisconsin and Minnesota, met at the Wabasha Middle School Tuesday night for what was described as an informational meeting on Lake Pepin problems. The meeting was sponsored by the Great River Environmental Action Team (GREAT) and the Southeastern Minnesota Assistance and Planning Organization.

GREAT is a six state agency funded by the federal government to develop management policy for the Upper Mississippi River.

Although they had been invited, officials of the FDA were not at the meeting.

Joel Schilling, of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA), said PCB is chemically similar to DDT, which has been banned from use in the United States.

He said that up to 35 parts to a billion of PCB were found in tests on the lake. And he noted that the PCB concentrate increases as it moves up the food chain of fish.

The FDA ban on the shipment of carp has curtailed commercial fishing on the lake, a wide spot in the Mississippi River between Alma and Red Wing, Minn., and forced a Pepin fish wholesaler to bury at least 60,000 pounds of allegedly contaminated carp.

Pressure Urged

Schilling appealed to the group members to bring pressure on their congressmen for restricted use and greater control on the manufacture of PCB. He said states are powerless to ban the manufacture and spread of PCB in the environment.

Thus far, Schilling said, the PCA and other researchers have been unable to pinpoint the source of PCB in the Mississippi River.

"We are moving as rapidly as we can," he said. "This is a serious situation."

Monsanto Chemical Corp., of St. Louis, Mo., is the only US manufacturer of PCB, Schilling said. An Italian firm also exports the chemical to the US, he said.

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