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AWIC continues study of Coosa pollutants

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MONTGOMERY — Present levels of the organic compound PCB found in the Coosa River do not present a significant health hazard, according to Dr. Ira Myers, state health officer and chairman of the Alabama Water Improvement Commission.

PCB is an abbreviation for polychlorinated biphenyls, a persistent chemical compound used in the manufacture of electrical transformers and capacitors.

The State of Georgia recently closed the Coosa within its boundaries to fishing because of PCB pollution from a General Electrical plant near Rome.

The closed section lies upstream from Weiss Lake in Cherokee County.

A Water Improvement Commission (AWIC) staff report says samples of fish, water and sediments from the Coosa in Alabama do not show PCB levels near those established as maximums by federal agencies.

The commission was advised at a Monday meeting that samples from Chocolocco Creek, which flows into Lake Logan Martin on the Coosa and Logan Martin itself produced "very low PCB levels."

That area was of concern to AWIC because the Monsanto Co. plant in Anniston manufactured PCBs until 1971 "and there was some apprehension that concentrations in fish flesh in this area would be elevated. Such was not the case, however, as the samples collected to date barely exceed one part per million in the edible portion of fish flesh."

The Federal Drug Administration has established five parts per million as a maximum tolerable level in fish flesh.

AWIC took samples from Weiss Lake Aug. 18-19 for analysis by the Environmental Protection Agency's regional laboratory in Atlanta, and early in September took additional samples for analysis by the Pesticide Residue Laboratory of the State Department of Agriculture and Industries.

Those results were forewarded to the State Department of Public Health and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which is the state agency empowered to close any state water to fishing.

Those agencies said there was no need to close Alabama sections of the Coosa as Georgia had.

According to the staff report, a periodic sampling program is continuing with quarterly samples being taken. Sampling is under way this week at Weiss Lake, according to the report.

The staff has also visited the GE plant near Rome, and found "everything which can be done has been done to eliminate any source of PCB contamination."

GE is scheduled to eliminate PCB as a raw material in its manufacture of transformers in July, 1977. "Certain landfill practices" of the last 22 years on the plant site "make it extremely difficult to completely eliminate any source of PCB loss and the staff would anticipate that losses of undefined magnitude at undeterminable intervals could be expected," the report said.

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