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Forced Out of Business?

Chemical Cramp

By TONY WALTER
Press-Gazette Staff Writer

The Hermes boys are out of work.

Oh, they can keep busy a couple days a week by hauling their boat and nets to Lake Buttes des Morts.

But that isn't the same thing.

You see, the Hermes boys are fishermen, commercial fishermen. There is Lee, his brothers Steve and Don, and his cousins Jim and Tom. For four generations, the Hermes family has made a living by catching carp in the bay and selling them.

The carp are still in the bay and there is still a market for the fish, both for canning and for sport fishing in the South.

But the Hermes boys and all other commercial fishermen are restricted from selling the bay carp for food. It has been discovered that the fish are carrying high degrees of PCBs, a toxic industrial chemical used in electrical products because of their great resistance to heat. PCBs are also discharged into the Fox River by paper companies that produce recycled materials.

The Food and Drug Administration arbitrarily determined earlier this year that no fish containing more than 5 parts per million of PCB could be sold on the market. While tests are still inconclusive, it has been established that PCBs could pose a distinct health hazard to humans.

So, while the DNR tries to decide whether or not it will place some restrictions on the large and powerful paper industry and the EPA and FDA decide if further guidelines are necessary in the control of PCBs, the Hermes do not fish the bay.

They and other commercial fishermen are the victims of an environmental error that may take years to correct. In the Hermes' case, it is unfortunate, unavoidable and unsolvable.

When the FDA announced its standards, the State Department of Agriculture sent a team of experts to the Hermes fisheries in the Town of Howard. They took five fish and found that their PCB content ranged from 13 to 57 parts per million.

The fish were bad.

The Hermes boys were informed that the penalty for selling this fish for human consumption would be $1,000 or a year in jail. Although it was their livlihood, the Hermes released the 15,000 pounds of carp they had in their holding pond.

Since that day, Lee Hermes and his wife, Glorianne, have estimated that they have lost $12,000 in fishing business. Lee, Don and Steve operate one business while cousins Jim and Tom operate another.

"As someone mentioned to us," said Lee, "the choice we had was $1,000, one year in jail or the bread line. We were catching about 900,000 to 1 million pounds of fish per year and selling it for seven cents a pounds. About 90 percent of our business came from the carp we caught in the bay. We can't make a living fishing in Lake Buttes des Morts."

For Lee and Glorianne Hermes, the situation is serious. They have seven children. Jim and Jean Hermes have four children.

"It isn't so bad for me," said Don, who is single. "Lee and Glorianne are the ones with the real problem. They have mouths to feed."

The Hermes boys began an extensive letter-writing campaign when their business was curtailed but the responses haven't been too encouraging. Gov. Patrick Lucey said he has asked the Department of Emergency Government to investigate the possibility of obtaining disaster relief funds for the Hermeses but nothing has come yet.

Lt. Gov. Martin Schreiber suggested that they either fish inland lakes or sell the carp for fish meal. There is still a market for the latter.

"Some people have suggested that we apply for a small business loan," said Don Hermes, "but what business would we use it for?"

The Hermeses have an idea. They say that they could continue to fish the bad carp out of the bay and be subsidized by the DNR, thereby helping the DNR to keep the bay clean and help prevent an surplus of carp.

"I don't think it would be very feasible to remove the fish," said Stan Kilnert of the DNR. "That wouldn't have much effect on the PCB problem."

What the PCB problem is, of course, is still a question to be answered. Many experts feel that even by eliminating the use of PCBs right now, the portions of the chemical already in the water now would remain for several years.

That doesn't give the Hermes boys much hope for their business but it rankles

MONS 033367



Time To Fold Up — Lee, left, and Don Hermes fold up their nets in response to state Department of Natural Resources orders to stop selling carp netted from Green bay because the PCB content may be dangerous to the health of consumers.

(Press-Gazette Photo)

MONS 033368