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New Bedford fish checked for chemicals

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The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries is analyzing fish from New Bedford Harbor to determine the extent of pollution by PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — but there is little chance that the harbor will be closed to fishing, a division spokesman said yesterday.

The Environmental Protection Agency has found as much as 140 parts per million of the chemical, a known cancer-causing agent, on the harbor bottom, and levels in shellfish as high as 53 parts per million. The government has set five parts per million as the maximum allowable level of PCB's for human consumption.

PCBs are chemicals used as fire-resistant insulators by electrical manufacturers. Last year New York health officials closed the Hudson River to commercial fishing and warned sports anglers not to eat fish from the river after high concentrations were found there.

PCBs remain unchanged in the environment for years. Fish that ingest them accumulate them in their bodies and the concentration is passed along the food chain to higher organisms. They have been found to cause cancer in laboratory animals.

Lee Bridges of the state Marine Fisheries Division said that reports on fish in the harbor will probably not be available until the end of the month.

He said it is unlikely that the harbor will be closed to fishing, although it is likely that sports anglers will be warned not to eat fish from the harbor if high concentrations of PCB's are found.

The fish being analyzed are eels, flounder, scup and tautog, all bottom dwelling species that would be most likely to be infected.

Other sports fish such as striped bass and bluefish are migratory and are not bottom feeders, so they probably would not squire high concentrations of the chemical, he said.

The pollution of the harbor does not affect the city's extensive commercial fishing fleet, Bridges said, because the boats operate in offshore waters.

Bridges said the division is analyzing shellfish from waters close to New Bedford Harbor to find out if they have been infected.

Shellfishing in New Bedford Harbor has long been closed because of bacterial pollution. Only permits to take shellfish for bait have been issued, Bridges said, and the discovery of high concentrations of PCB's in bay shellfish has caused the revocation of those permits.

Officials say the chemical apparently comes from two plants in the New Bedford area, the Aerovox Corp. and the Cornell-Dubilier Co.

Only one manufacturer, Monsanto Chemical Co., still manufactures PCB's, and the company has promised to cease production by 1978.

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