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House Unit Holds Hearings on PCB's

Washington - Great Lakes fisheries, on the upswing after years of decline, face a new threat: man-made PCB's (poly - chlorinated biphenyls), the House Merchant Marine Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife learned during intensive hearings on PCB's and other toxic substances.

"The presence of PCB's in the Great Lakes threatens to destroy commercial and sport fishing and associated industries, since contaminated fish are rendered unfit for human consumption and some fish become incapable of effective reproduction," Rep. James L. Oberstar, a member of the Subcommittee, noted during the hearing.

"PCB's are found throughout the Lakes, though their highest concentrations are in Lake Michigan, Lake Pepin and the Mississippi River.

"These toxic chemicals are jeopardizing a highly successful 12 - year, $33 million Federal program to restore Great Lakes fisheries by controlling the sea lamprey and alewife, and restocking more than 150 million lake trout, coho, chinook, Atlantic and kokanee salmon.

"This vast effort, in time and public funds, could be totally in vain if fish cannot reproduce, or if the Food and Drug Administration is forced to prohibit catching and marketing of contaminated fish."

PCB's are literally everywhere in the environment. They accumulate in the bodies of fish, animals and man, and remain active over far longer periods than DDT and other pesticides.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell Train testified that over the past 45 years some 1.4 billion pounds of PCB's have been produced in the U.S., for use in electrical equipment such as transformers, capacitors, hydraulic equipment, paper products and other industrial products.

U.S. industry produces 35-40 million pounds of PCB's per year, of which some 10 million pounds escape into the environment. But only about 10,000 pounds of the fugitive substance can be regulated under present law, meaning that new legislative authority is needed.

Most of the water contamination comes from old landfills, or from lake and stream sediments stirred up by various means and returned to free-flowing waters.

"This is an extremely difficult problem, for which there is no ready, and certainly no simple or inexpensive solution," Oberstar said.

"PCB's perform a useful and important function as a fire-resistant insulating fluid in electrical transformers and no acceptable substitutes have yet been put into widespread use.

"We must have as our goal the elimination of PCB's from the environment of the U.S. as rapidly as possible.

"I hope these hearings will help bring about that goal."

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