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Reduction Asked Of Chemicals In Fresh Water Fish

By Michael J. Conlon

WASHINGTON — Two environmental groups have asked the Food and Drug Administration to reduce the amount of a widely used industrial chemical allowed in fresh water fish and, eventually, to ban its presence in all foods.

The Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council said recent disclosures that fish from the Hudson River and the Lake Michigan are highly contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyls make prompt action necessary.

The FDA said it is studying "all available information" on the question, including the economic impact on the fishing industry, and will decide whether it needs to change its current rules governing PCB in fish.

Since 1970 the FDA has allowed fresh water fish to be sold in interstate commerce if they have no more than five parts per million of PCB. Last week Canada said it was going to a stiffer tolerance level of two parts per million.

The move will affect mostly fish from the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River because PCB contamination is not a problem with salt water fish.

Coho salmon from the Great Lakes, for instance, have more than two parts per million and would be forced out of interstate commerce if the tolerance level were lowered in this country.

"Largely due FDA to efforts, levels of PCB in the American diet have decreased markedly in the last several years," the FDA said.

The petition from the two environmental groups said:

"Recent tests with experimental animals have shown PCBs to cause cancer and other adverse health effects, including reproductive failure, as well as a range of immediate adverse health effects, including skin disease, nervous disorders and stillbirths in human workers directly exposed to them. The FDA's own experts have expressed concern in recent testimony that large segments of the general population may be at risk involuntarily because of their high dietary intake of PCBs."

PCBs have been used since 1929 for a wide variety of products such as paints, plastics, rubber and inks. They are chemically related to DDT, are not easily broken down in the environment and "are present in high levels in human food and body fat," the petition said.

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