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PCB Michigan

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for years by electrical equipment industries, which used them as insulating agents in capacitors and transformers. In recent years they have been linked to birth defects and cancer, and Congress prohibited their manufacture in the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act. The FDA's proposed regulation recognized that "PCB contamination of the aquatic environment is sufficiently widespread that fish, mainly freshwater fish, contain significant amounts of the contaminant." Adds EDF attorney Jacqueline M. Warren: "PCBs are so ubiquitous they've been found in the air, and even in mother's milk."

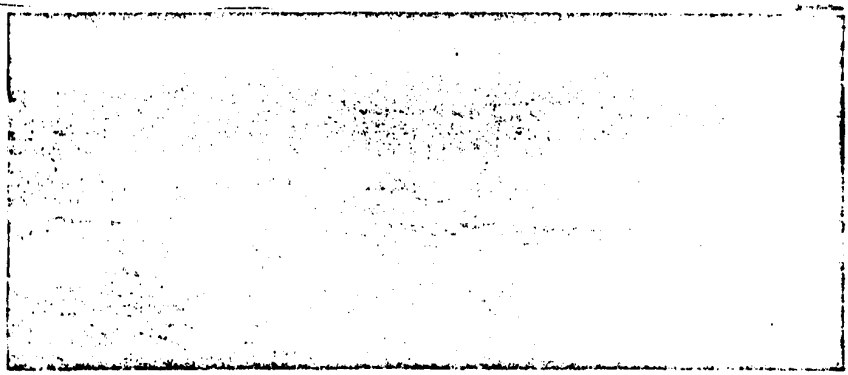
The FDA's 1977 proposal would lower permissible tolerances in fish from 5 parts per million (ppm) to 2 ppm. It also would set strict standards for eggs, milk, and poultry, although those industries are not concerned about meeting the limits. However, fishermen say the fish standard could ruin their livelihood. "The impact of lowering the PCB levels probably would be to cause the commercial fishing business in Lake Michigan to collapse," says Thomas B. Sheffy, surveillance chemist for the Bureau of Water Quality in Wisconsin's Natural Resources Dept.

Industry in chaos. In addition, commercial fish industry officials maintain that the lower standard will not really protect the public health because it will not apply to sport fishing, an activity that is usually regulated by the states. However, the Midwestern states could be influenced by any FDA action and could issue controls on sport fishing. In the Upper Great Lakes area, sport fishing is estimated to be a $500 million annual industry.

That figure is only a small part of the $10 billion ocean and freshwater fishing industry. The FDA calculates that loss than 3% of the entire fish catch would be influenced by the rule. "In an overall sense, it's not a big impact, but fishermen in areas of contaminated water are 100% affected," says Elizabeth J. Campbell, an official in the FDA's division of regulatory guidance. But fishing interests sense the impact may go further. "It creates chaos throughout the industry," says Lee J. Weddig, executive vice-president of the National Fisheries Institute. The reason: Small PCB-contaminated fish may migrate into the ocean, where they become a food source for larger fish. Thus, all sectors of the fishing industry may have to worry about the standard.

Clearly, those most affected are Great Lakes fishermen. In 1976, PCB concentrations in Michigan reached their peak, averaging about 10 ppm in salmon and 15 ppm in lake trout. These average levels fell last year to about 3 ppm, still unacceptable under the FDA proposal. In a sample test, the Michigan Agriculture Dept. determined that half of the fish catch would have trouble passing the 2-ppm standard. "This could certainly forestall the large potential for commercial fishing in the Great Lakes for a couple of more years," predicts Edward C. Heffron, chief of Michigan's agricultural food inspection division.

Immune, for all practical purposes, from any FDA standard would be a little-noticed portion of the Great Lakes fishing industry—American Indians who claim treaty rights to unrestricted fishing. Some officials estimate that the Indians account for 20% to 25% of the actual commercial take from the lakes, including salmon and trout, with higher PCB counts. However, Heffron says that the Indians "have been very selective in sorting out the fish with high residues of PCBs." ■



PCB contamination has caused the banning of commercial fishing on the Hudson River.

ENVIRONMENT

The growing threat to Great Lakes fishing

It has been almost two years since the Food & Drug Administration proposed, but failed finally, to issue strict limits for polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in fish. Now the Environmental Defense Fund is suing to force the agency to require the lowered levels. If the environmental group wins, it could mean losses of $18 million for the Great Lakes commercial fishing industry and $127 million for the entire fish processing industry. The FDA action also would probably mean a New York State clampdown on sport fishing in the Hudson River, where commercial fishing has been banned since 1976 because of PCB contamination.

PCBs were discharged into river waters

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