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State legislation expected to whip PCB chemical contamination

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Indiana will solve its problem of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — but it's going to take a while, says the Indiana Board of Health.

PCBs are plaguing officials in Monroe and Lawrence Counties. Many streams, including the East Fork of the White River have been posted with signs warning anglers that fish in those waters are unfit to eat.

The chemical is primarily used as insulating fluids in transformers and large capacitors because of its remarkable flame retardant characteristics.

Officials in Monroe County say the primary dispenser of the PCBs is the local Westinghouse plant.

The Health Board says that although the PCB concentration in waste water is small — usually measured in parts per billion — the concentration increases by biomagnification through the food chain.

For example, sludge from the Bloomington sewage plant was used as fertilizer. When live-stock grazed on the land over a period of time they absorbed PCBs from thousands of pounds of grass.

In streams or lakes, fish absorb the chemical from the water and other organisms.

If the contaminated meat or milk from the livestock is consumed by humans, the PCBs are again concentrated.

The U.S. Environmental Protection agency estimates that half the 700 million pounds of PCB produced in the past 45 years have been released into the environment.

Because the substance does not degrade into harmless matter, a danger potential will exist for years to come, the board says.

Because of the Commercial fishing operations in many areas of the Great Lakes have been halted and fishermen have been warned not to eat more than one meal of fish a week, the board says.

In January, Monsanto, the sole American producer of the substance, announced it will phase out PCBs as soon as an acceptable substitute is found.

This year, the Indiana legislature enacted legislation to phase out the use of the chemical, the first state to do so. Environmentalist groups are pushing for similar federal legislation.

The Board of Health says the present legislation will allow the problem to be whipped.

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