IJC Sees Long Effort in Cleanup Of Lakes, Asks New Deadlines

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News Environmental Reporter

Predicting a long road ahead before all pollutants are scrubbed from Great Lakes Waters, the International Joint Commission today urged the U. S. and Canadian governments to set a new series of cleanup deadlines.

The commission noted that the Dec. 31, 1975, deadline for completion or implementation of programs necessary to achieve water quality has passed, and, despite significant progress, all necessary programs are not in operation.

Delays in municipal sewage treatment programs, uncertainties in industrial programs and downright lack of government solutions to such problems as discharge of vessel wastes have delayed compliance schedules.

The commission cautioned that it "detects that the public perception of the timetable for the cleanup effort is distorted."

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THE IJC said the Dec. 31, 1975, deadline "has led many residents of the area to believe that between 1972 (when the agreement was signed) and 1975 the lakes were to be cleaned up. This is not so.

"Control action on some pollutants can result in the elimination of their effects in the lakes almost immediately. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that, if the discharge of other pollutants to the lakes were stopped tomorrow, it could be 15 or more years before some effects of the present pollution would disappear."

The commission's comments were contained in its third annual report on the Great Lakes water quality and cover its work during 1974.

The IJC report is laced with warnings about a series of industrial pollutant problems that persist in the lakes, including polychlorinated biphenols (PCBs), mercury, asbestos fibers and some technology discharges that pose potential health problems to those who rely on the lakes for drinking water and recreation.

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THE REPORT cites 69 problem areas that continue to fail to meet water quality objectives. They include the Niagara River, the Buffalo River, Olcott Harbor, Niagara Beach, Tonawanda Creek and the Fredonia-Westfield areas.

Discharges from Cleveland, Toledo and Detroit continue to reduce Lake Erie water quality, as do Hamilton, Toronto, Rochester and Oswego on Lake Ontario.

In a warning to public and government alike, the IJC states: "There is a need to continue vigorous support, including financial, for the updating and improvement of sewage treatment works to accommodate growth and correct the problems arising from combined storm and sanitary sewers."

The commission said that while federal, state and provincial governments show continuing concern, "The major effort for the control of industrial pollution is still to be achieved."

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THE COMMISSION found that while there is some improvement in chloride and phosphorus concentrations in Lake Erie, oxygen depletion in the central basin "has not improved and remains a serious concern."

It said Lake Ontario in 1974 for the first time showed early signs of oxygen deficiency in the deeper waters of the open lake.

The report states that "Lake Erie (and Lake Ontario) fish from certain localized waters, on occasion, show high levels of mercury." It found that "Niagara River water quality remains degraded by municipal and industrial wastes causing serious problems."

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