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Officials: Curtail Use Of Water Pollutant

Chicago Sun-Times Service

Chicago — An interstate committee of environmental officials stopped short of recommending a total ban on polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) industrial chemicals, but concluded that their use should be curtailed.

Recent research has shown that PCBs can prevent reproduction in fish, birds and mammals, and may have similar effects on humans.

The Lake Michigan Toxic Substances Committee decided "many — if not all — uses of PCBs can be eliminated or replaced by alternative compounds," said Karl Bremer, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) official and member of the committee.

Donald Mount, director of the EPA National Water Quality Laboratory in Duluth, has informed the agency that the committee favors allowing only manufacturers of electrical transformers and capacitors to use PCBs.

Fat Accumulation

PCBs are used as insulating fluids, as plasticizers for paints and adhesives and as fire-resistant electrical fluids.

These compounds pervade the global environment, finding their way into lakes and rivers and accumulating in the fat of fish.

Large lake trout and salmon taken from Lake Michigan have contained as much as 50 parts of PCB per million — 10 times the level the Food and Drug Administration tolarates for human consumption.

PCB-contaminated fish have been caught in the upper Mississippi, Ohio and Hudson Rivers as well as the Fox and Milwaukee Rivers in Wisconsin, said Gilman Veith of the water laboratory.

"Generally, wherever you have industrial concentrations, you will find PCB contamination of fish," he said.

—Michigan environmental officials urged the Michigan Legislature and Congress to outlaw the use of PCBs.

—Illinois health and environmental officials are studying the PCB problem but have not decided on a course of action, said Anthony Dean, director of conservation.

Cutback

Monsanto Chemical Co., the sole American manufacturer of PCBs, has cut back voluntarily on PCB sales since 1970. The chemicals, however, still are produced widely in Europe and Japan.

Despite the drop in Monsanto's production, PCBs in Lake Michigan and other bodies of water have not decreased appreciably in the past five years.

Dow Chemical Co. is trying to develop a substitute chemical.

Precautions

Several steps have been taken as public health precautions:

—The FDA recently forced a Pepin, Wis., fish processor to bury 20,000 pounds of PCB-tainted carp fillets after detecting levels as high as 14 parts per million (ppm). The carp had been taken from Lake Pepin, a broad reach of the Mississippi downstream from Minneapolis and St. Paul.

—Minnesota health officials advised sports fishermen to eat fish out of the upper Mississippi only once a week.

—Wisconsin health officials urged a once-a-week limit to consumption of large salmon and trout (over 24 inches long) from Lake Michigan and Green Bay, and all fish from a 60-mile stretch of the Mississippi from Prescott, Wis., to lower Lake Pepin and a 12-mile stretch of the Fox River near Portage, Wis. Children and pregnant women were cautioned to eat only one portion a week.

—The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture said it would seize any commercial fish containing more than 5 ppm.

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