Chicago Tribune
THE WORLD'S GREATEST NEWSPAPER
D. 767,793 SUN. 1,016,275

MAY 6 1976

Life line

What to do about PCBs in lake?

ONE OF THE thorniest ecological puzzlers facing Illinois is what to do about PCBs tainting fish in Lake Michigan.

The second-thorniest poser is trying to understand what the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency intends to do about it.

PCB is short for polychlorinated biphenyls, a chemical poison used widely in the electrical industry as a coolant. It is also used in paints, inks, hydraulic fluids, and a variety of other products because it is insoluble and heat-resistant.

IN ILLINOIS, SPORT fishermen are warned against eating more than one meal a week of Lake Michigan salmon and lake trout because most of the big fish are contaminated with PCB levels above the Federal Food and Drug Administration pure food limit of five parts per million.

During a recent Springfield hearing on proposed bills to curb PCB pollution, Illinois EPA Director Richard Briceland was quoted as saying he does not favor an Illinois law controlling the use of PCBs.

Afterward, he said that's not what he said.

"If PCB needs to be regulated, it should be regulated through the structure set up," Briceland asserted. "We've got hundreds of chemical compounds dangerous to health. Do you want the legislature to pass a law dealing with every compound?"

BUT, BRICELAND was asked, isn't he arguing against passing a law controlling PCB specifically, as he was quoted?

"After adequate hearings, and if it was determined a law is necessary, I favor anything required to provide effective control," he answered. "If controls for PCB are needed for the safety of Illinois, then I favor those controls established under the Illinois Environmental Protection Act."

In appearing to be on both sides of the PCB fence at the same time, Briceland has drawn some fire from environmentalists, who point out that PCBs are threatening Lake Michigan's commercial fishing industry.

"IT WOULD SHOW lack of concern for the public not to immediately ban PCB in Illinois," Richard Robbins of the Lake Michigan Federation says.

"I think he [Briceland] is no longer interested in safeguarding the environment," said James Griffith of an environmental coalition called PCB Gone.

Casey Bukro
Environment editor



Briceland also seems to be running counter to federal environmental control officials, who are calling for stricter controls on PCB.

Illinois is the home of Monsanto Chemical Co., headquartered in East St. Louis, sole manufacturers of PCB in the United States.

"PCBs CLEARLY ARE bad actors, and we need controls for PCBs," Briceland went on. "The real issue is what kind of controls and how they should be implemented."

THE LEVELS AT which PCBs begin to become poisonous are not known, he insists, although a federal PCB conference in Chicago last winter clearly established the effects of PCB poisoning.

Asked what Illinois intends to do to rescue Lake Michigan's commercial fishing industry now being threatened by PCB contamination, Briceland answered.

"We effectively prohibit any discharge of polychlorinated biphenyls from Illinois into Lake Michigan." Outboard Marine Corp. of Waukegan is the only Illinois firm known to discharge PCB into Lake Michigan, he said.

Polluters need a permit to discharge into Lake Michigan, Briceland said, and there are no permits issued to do that.

"Therefore, it is illegal to discharge PCBs," concluded Briceland. That seems to be Illinois' answer to PCB-contaminated fish in Lake Michigan. It's not allowed, even though it is happening.

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