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New PCB Limit Perils Fishing for Sport, Cash

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WISCONSIN'S $2.6 million commercial fishing industry stands imperiled and its multi-million-dollar sport fishing program awaits, at best, an uncertain future in the face of an impending federal ruling on contaminants in Lake Michigan fish.

The US Food and Drug Administration is expected, perhaps as soon as late summer or early fall, to reduce the allowable PCB limit in Lake Michigan fish from 5 parts per million (ppm) to 2 ppm.

This would have the practical affect of wiping out 90% of Wisconsin's commercial fishing industry, according to James Addis, director of fish management for the Department of Natural Resources.

Mike Conlon, director of fisheries for the Illinois Department of Conservation, said the new limit would result in the closure of commercial fishing on Lake Michigan.

Wisconsin's Lake Michigan sports fishing program, variously estimated to be worth up to $30 million annually including related activites, is in no such immediate jeopardy, according to Addis, but significant changes seem certain to come if the new limit is adopted.

"We will look to the medical community for immediate direction," Addis said. "We will ask our State Health and Social Services Administration to review the federal ruling. If consumption of Lake Michigan fish is determined to be a public health hazard, we will have to take steps to discourage that consumption."

THE STATE'S $441,000 Lake Michigan fish stocking program probably will continue, Addis said. Wisconsin spends that amount stocking the lake with coho and chinook salmon, brown, rainbow and brook trout. Lake trout stocking is done by federal authorities.

Tests show that all of these fish contain PCB contaminates in excess of the 2 ppm level.

Research has shown the industrial chemical PCB, in large doses, to cause skin lesions in humans and cancer in test animals. Used in a variety of everyday products like paint and refrigerators, the contaminant is found virtually everywhere, but fish are the major conduit to humans.

Until now, only larger fish failed to meet the PCB pure food limit. The 2 ppm level, however, would disqualify chubs and, possibly, perch from some areas, from the commercial market. Whitefish right now in Wisconsin are borderline.

Wisconsin sport fishermen eat Lake Michigan fish at their own risk now. The State Department of Health and Social Services recommends no more than one meal of Lake Michigan salmon or trout per week. Children and expectant mothers should limit consumption to no more than one average serving per week.

Wisconsin's present Lake Michigan fisheries budget is $630,000, $378,000 of which are state funds and $252,000 federal monies. Of that total, $441,000 is spent for the stocking program while $180,000 goes for investigations of all kinds.

LIKE THE states of Illinois, Michigan and Indiana, Wisconsin believes that the FDA did not provide adequate documentation on lowering the PCB limit. And, the states believe, insufficient weight was given to the potential for declining PCB levels.

At any rate, there seems good reason to believe the states will go on with their own salmon stocking programs. And, Addis believes, federal authorities will contiue to plant lake trout in an effort to establish a reproducing population of that species in the lake.

Without an extensive population of salmon in the lake there would be an alewife explosion, thus triggering the possibility of an alewife dieoff rivaling that of the mid-1960s. Such a dieoff would, in itself, constitute a secondary public health hazard, Addis said.

Ned Fogle, Great Lakes fisheries specialist for Michigan, says his state is concerned with the new federal ruling.

"We feel the 5 ppm level is objectively protecting the public as well as certain the public is adquately warned of the danger of further fish consumption," Addis said. "If the public stops eating the fish, we'll have no problem. But our experience up to now shows that most people fish the lake because they want to eat what they catch. It appears it may be difficult to sell the public on the idea that they can't eat the fish."

IN ANTICIPATION of the new federal ruling, Wisconsin fisheries officials are exploring the possibility of establishing a secondary fishery in parts of the lake involving fish less susceptible to contamination.

Walleyes already have been successfully stocked in Green Bay. Muskeles are being looked to as a possibility in certain parts of the lake where habitat conditions are right. Fish managers are also talking about the possibility of reviving the harbor perch population by transplanting stunted fish from inland lakes.

At the moment, however, Addis said, these possibilities represent no more than "pie in the sky" thinking by fish managers.

"The walleye program looks good," he said. "But the rest of it needs exploring. We have to look at the economics of it and consider the problems as well as the benefits."

In the view of Wisconsin officials, what has to be established first, in light of new PCB minimum levels, is some kind of offshore trophy fishing program. Salmon stocks must be maintained to avert an alewife explosion. The lake trout rehabilitation program should continue.

And people will have to get used to the fact that their salmon, in the immediate future, at least, will have to come from a can.

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