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Lack of money may halt state search for PCBs

By ANITA SUSI

TRENTON — Does New Jersey have a PCB pollution problem similar to the one in New York?

We may not have the money to find out, according to state health and environmental officials who say their budgets won't cover the costs of the expensive testing program needed to determine PCB levels.

PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are toxic compounds used primarily in electronic components. Virtually nonbiodegradable, they tend to accumulate in the fatty tissues of fish, and have been linked to miscarriages and stillbirths as well as severe skin disorders. New York residents were recently warned against eating several native types of fish because of disturbingly high PCB levels.

Because of the problem in New York, federal and state officials have been meeting here to map out a joint program to see if New Jersey also has a serious PCB problem. But state agencies participating in the joint program may be unable to fulfill their roles because of a lack of funds, according to a spokesman for the state Department of Health.

While it is not yet known exactly how great the hazard of PCB poisoning may be in local fish, Dr. Joana Finlay, commissioner of the state Health Department, said she plans to ask the Legislature to provide money to aid the testing program.

Bruce Pyle, head of the division of Fish and Game in the Department of Environmental Protection, said his agency's work on PCB pollution is "at a temporary impasse" because of the lack of funds.

A single sampling and analysis for PCBs costs about $400, with somewhat cheaper bulk rates, according to a health department spokesman who said he was quoting federal Environmental Protection Agency figures.

"That's a whole lot of money," said the spokesman, adding that there are questions as to whether the hazard is as serious as it has been pictured.

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