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'Eggs (of northern pike) have been wiped out and the DNR hatchery program is imperiled'

State officials moving hesitantly on PCB ban

By JAMES L. KERWIN
News Staff Writer

LANSING — Concerned about spreading contaminants, state officials are moving cautiously towards banning the controversial chemical compound PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl).

Excessive amounts of the chemical found in the flesh of fish have prompted the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) to bar interstate shipment of some commercial catches from the Great Lakes.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) also has asked for a halt of industrial use of PCB because of fish contamination which some contend poses a threat to Michigan's sport fishing and tourist industry.

But members of the State Water Resources Commission don't want to take any hasty action on banning the chemical — used in several manufacturing processes and commercial products — until safe substitutes can be found.

Also, they want precautions taken to deposit PCB in use without causing any health hazard or environmental damage.

The commission's staff will come up with some recommendation — for the commission to form a policy — at the agency's August meeting.

At present, they back a proposal for a series of national hearings on the danger of PCB's as suggested by Francis Mayo, director of the Midwest region of the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Some health authorities have been concerned about PCB's ever since the chemical contaminated some rice oil in Japan, causing serious illness for people who used the oil.

"Some people got pretty damn sick ... it is very toxic," reported William G. Turney, who is heading a team drawing up the Michigan recommendations.

Others have been concerned because PCB has contaminated eggs of northern pike so badly none have hatched.

"Eggs (of northern pike) taken from Muskegon Lake have been wiped out by PCB, and the DNR hatchery program has been imperiled," Turney said.

In addition, mink feeding on PCB-contaminated fish have died or failed to reproduce, according to some reports.

State officials have cracked down on some uses of the chemical compound since catfish containing as much 200 parts per million were found in Saginaw Bay.

The FDA sets a limit of five parts per million, and then urges limited consumption because of uncertain health hazards.

PCB's in Saginaw Bay were traced to industrial processes, including the auto industry, which were changed to eliminate the threat.

State officials could ban PCB — as with the pesticide DDT, which now has only limited use in Michigan — or restrict its use to "closed circuit systems" where it couldn't get into water.

At present, it is used widely as a dielectric fluid in transformers and in manufacturing processes. It also has been used as a water softner, in noncarborn-impression paper and even hand soap.

Some studying the problem fear chemical substitutes already suggested may pose just as much a hazard.

Gov. Milliken's Environmental Review Board also will check the problem at its session this week. Any decision on a ban, however, would be left up to state health authorities and Gov. Milliken.

What to do with PCB on hand or as part of products now remains unrsolved.

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