

THOUGHT for food

Levels of toxic PCBs in fish decline, but not enough to lift health warnings

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NEW JERSEY'S rivers, bays and ocean may be getting cleaner, but some of the fish that dwell in them aren't going to be judged safe to eat in any quantity for the foreseeable future.

The state DEPE began warning about toxic PCBs in some species more than a decade ago, and by now, fishermen may be wondering when the contamination problem will end and the warnings will be lifted.

The answer is, don't hold your breath.

While there are some signs that levels are declining, the state probably will not change its health warnings on eating certain fish, or bans on selling certain species, a state environmental official said.

"The low levels (of PCBs) that we're seeing in the animals are likely to continue," said Bruce Ruppel, a principal environmental specialist in the Department of Environmental Protection and Energy.

The DEPE recently released a

study of PCBs, short for polychlorinated biphenyls, and other chemicals in fish and blue crabs.

"I think PCBs certainly are going to be around with us for ... years to come," said Ronald Sloan, a New York state research scientist who has studied PCBs in fish since 1977.

PCBs are a family of versatile industrial chemicals. Some of them are suspected of causing cancer and other health problems. PCBs are long-lasting in the environment.

PCBs in striped bass have declined over time, but it's an open question when fisheries in the heavily contaminated Hudson River could reopen, Sloan said.

In 1990, New York state began considering whether to allow people to catch and release fish in the upper Hudson. However, the state's Department of Environmental Conservation found a roughly threefold increase in PCBs in fresh water fish in the upper Hudson from 1991 to 1992, Sloan said.

"There's concern that because

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PCBs in seafood

The latest state study finds that fish and crabs in northeastern New Jersey are more contaminated by PCBs than those farther south, supporting earlier findings. Levels have declined in recent years, but health advisories and sales bans probably will not change.



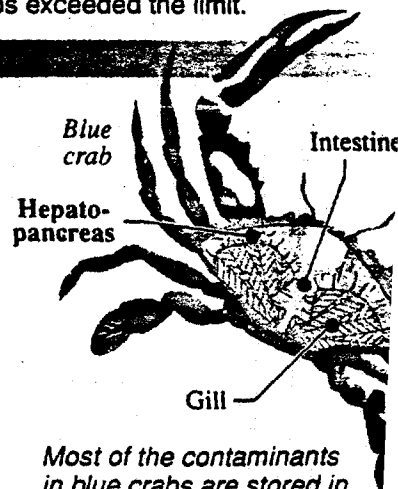
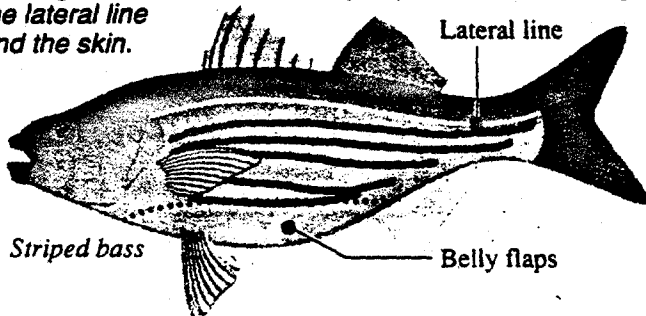
Bluefish	REGION	PCB LEVEL*	FDA LIMIT: 2.0
	NE	1.0	
	NC	0.8	
	SC	0.6	
Weakfish	NE	0.5	
	NC	0.4	
	SC	0.28	
Striped bass	NE	1.5	
	NC	1.2	
	SC	0.8	
Blue crabs (in hepatopancreas)	NE	1.5	
	NC	0.44	
	SC	none detected	

*Average levels of contamination in each species, in parts per million. Although average levels may be under the Food and Drug Administration's limit, individual samples of some bluefish, striped bass and blue crabs exceeded the limit.

REDUCING YOUR TOXIC EXPOSURE

Contaminants tend to accumulate in fatty tissues, with larger fish often having higher PCB levels than smaller fish of the same species. Bluefish longer than 24 inches or heavier than 6 pounds may have PCB levels three times as high as smaller fish. The state advises limiting consumption of striped bass and large bluefish taken from offshore waters to one meal per week. Cook fish ways that remove fats, such as grilling, broiling on an elevated rack or boiling in water.

For finfish — especially fatty species such as bluefish, striped bass and weakfish — remove fatty tissues before cooking. These include the belly flaps, dark meat along the lateral line and the skin.



Most of the contaminants in blue crabs are stored in the hepatopancreas, also known as the tomalley, green gland or mustard. Remove it before cooking.

For more information on marine animal sales bans and health advisories, call the DEPE at 609-292-2083; for freshwater fish, call 609-292-8642. GEORGE FREDERICK, SEAN MCNAUGHTON & ROBERT BRITT, Asbury Park Press SOURCE: N.J. Department of Environmental Protection and Energy.

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Fish

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the fresh water fish have seen an increase, we may see an increase in striped bass," said Kim A. McKown, a marine resources specialist for the New York environmental department.

The new DEPE study generally supports previous findings that the northeast region of New Jersey, which includes the New York Harbor area, is the most severely contaminated. Many health advisories recommend limited or no eating of certain species and bans on the sale of fish are in effect there. Some advisories and bans are in effect elsewhere in New Jersey.

Officials and activists are concerned that many "subsistence" fishermen are ignoring bans and health advisories in the northeast region.

The region includes the Sandy Hook and Raritan bays; the tidal portion of the Raritan River to the Route 1 bridge in New Brunswick; the Arthur Kill and Kill Van Kull; Newark Bay; the Passaic River upstream to the Dundee Dam; the Hackensack River up to the Oradell Dam; Upper New York Bay; and the portion of the Hudson River making up the New Jersey-New York state border.

The DEPE study examined fish and blue crabs caught mostly in 1988 and 1989. Ruppel said the agency does not have the money to do more studies at this point.

People who eat seafood in restaurants or from stores generally have no way of knowing where it comes from, unless the retailer knows, said Bruce Halgren, administrator of the DEPE's

Bureau of Marine Fisheries.

"What we follow in our house, and I'd suggest anybody would follow, is not to dedicate your diet to any one item," Halgren said. "Have a good amount of diversity," and follow health advisories on eating certain fish and crabs. DEPE officials have recommended for years not to eat the hepatopancreas, a digestive organ in crabs that accumulates PCBs and other fat-soluble chemicals. The organ is commonly called the mustard or tomalley. Muscle meat contains lower levels of chemicals than the hepatopancreas.

Among the advisories issued by the DEPE to fishermen and seafood eaters are several that apply to the Jersey Shore: The sale of striped bass is banned in all of New Jersey; limited consumption — no more than a meal a week, but none at all for younger women and children — is recommended for large bluefish, those over 24 inches or 6 pounds; and limited consumption is also advised for white perch and white catfish taken from the Northeast Region; striped bass from offshore waters from Sandy Hook to Barnegat Inlet; and American eels.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned the production of PCBs in 1977. But many PCB-laden transformers and other electrical equipment remain in service.

Spills, wastewater discharges, incineration and disposal in landfills have dispersed PCBs throughout the environment, the DEPE says. Ongoing dredging may release PCBs into the water, Ruppel said.

The Hudson River ecosystem is contaminated with "perhaps the largest reservoir of PCBs of any river or estuary in the world," according to the Hudson River Foundation, which supports river-related research, education

and other projects.

About 200 miles of the river — from Hudson Falls, N.Y., to the southern tip of Manhattan — are considered a federal "Superfund" hazardous waste site, said Ann Rychlenski, site community relations coordinator for the EPA's New York City office.

Two General Electric manufacturing plants, one in Hudson Falls, the other in nearby Fort Edward, discharged an estimated 1.1 million pounds of PCBs into the upper Hudson over three decades ending in 1977, the EPA has reported. Officials consider the plants to be a major source of PCBs in the Hudson.

GE disputes that estimate, said Daniel A. Abramowicz, manager of GE's environmental laboratory in Schenectady, N.Y.

In 1984, the EPA decided not to touch the sediments in a 40-mile stretch of the upper Hudson "since we felt the technology was just not available at that time" to clean them up, Rychlenski said.

In 1990, the EPA began a massive study of a 200-mile river stretch. The agency expects to decide what to do about the contamination, if anything, by early 1995, she said.

GE believes that natural bacteria are breaking down PCBs, and dredging river sediments would not solve the problem in fish, Abramowicz said.

Officials are "a long way" from concluding that bacteria will handle the bulk of the PCBs, said Ann Hill DeBarbieri, deputy commissioner of the New York environmental department.

"The government needs to really deal with the problem," said Thomas P. Fote, legislative chairman for the Jersey Coast Anglers Association. "Can we wait another 15 years? No. Fishermen and fish can't wait."