

River bass show lower PCB levels

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ALBANY – Reduced levels of PCBs, the toxic chemical that has turned the Hudson River into a Superfund site, may lead to the reopening of a striped bass commercial fishery in the lower river. But state officials yesterday warned that it's going to be a while before they lift the health advisories that children and women of child-bearing age eat none of the most popular river fish, including striped bass.

A study completed last week by state Department of Environmental Conservation scientists found that PCBs – polychlorinated biphenyls – in striped bass were within federal safety limits for the first time in two decades.

The reduced PCB levels were found only in striped bass taken from the river south of Poughkeepsie. The level in fish caught near Albany was lower than in the past, but still too high to be considered safe. The samples were taken in the spring of 1997. Striped bass are less prone to absorb the chemicals than other fish because they spend part of each year at sea.

But while that's the first good statistical news for the much maligned stripers in 23 years, the new results don't let off the numbers hook other polluted fish like American eels, white perch and white catfish. So the state's planned health advisory publicity blitz for this summer is going ahead, with posted signs along the river. "We're a long way from opening that striped bass commercial fishery," said state department of Environmental Conservation spokesman Gary Sheffer. "This is strictly specific to striped bass," he said, "We have not seen similar declines to other populations in the river and that's one of the things we've got to determine – why is that happening."

Still, the new figures are welcome public relations for river fish like shad and herring that are not considered polluted but swim in the shadow of the others that are, said commercial fisherman and naturalist Tom Lake of Wappingers Falls.

PCBs, linked to cancer in laboratory tests on animals, were legally released into the Hudson from General Electric plants north of Troy until they were banned in 1977. Commercial netting of striped bass, once a flourishing business on the lower Hudson in the spring, has been banned for 23 years because of PCB contamination in the fish. The study completed last week showed that PCBs in striped bass from the lower Hudson averaged 1.06 parts per million in 1997. The federal limit is 2 parts per million. Tests of 1998 samples won't be completed until April. "This does not mean that the river has recovered. Far from it," DEC scientist Ron Sloan wrote in his report summary. But if further testing is consistent with the 1997 results, the commercial fishing ban is no longer justified if it's based solely on PCB levels, Sloan wrote.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.
<http://www.th-record.com/1999/02/24/whfish.htm>