Don't eat the fish: Advisory offers cautions about PCBs still present in rivers
Tuesday, April 06, 1999
By Don Hopey, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Long-banned cancer-causing pesticides permeate the river bottom sediment and continue to turn up in the flesh of fish in Pittsburgh's three rivers, causing the state to continue consumption advisories for a number of species.

Bottom-feeding carp and channel catfish from the Ohio, Monongahela and Allegheny rivers around Pittsburgh, as well as the Beaver River should not be eaten because of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, state officials say, based on the latest advisory issued by the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission.

Smallmouth bass, spotted bass, walleye, sauger, white bass and freshwater drum also show PCB contamination but in smaller concentrations. Limiting consumption to one meal a week, or in some cases one meal every two months, is advised.

The commission's report mirrors an earlier advisory issued by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, and is almost identical to last year's advisories for the Ohio River and its tributaries.

"Water quality in the rivers is getting better, but we're still finding PCBs and chlordane that they're not allowed to use or discharge into the rivers in the fish," said Jeanne Ison, commission spokeswoman.

Fish for testing and assessment were collected from 16 locations along the Ohio River and its tributaries. Flesh samples were tested for PCBs, banned in 1979; chlordane, banned in 1975; DDT, banned in 1972; dieldrin, banned in 1987; endrin, banned in 1984; and hexachlorobenzene, banned in 1985.

Based on the results Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana have issued consumption advisories.

In addition to the above mentioned fish, species currently listed on one or more states' advisories include largemouth bass, paddlefish, whitefish, spotted bass, smallmouth buffalo, flathead catfish and hybrid striped bass.

"We're using the Great Lakes Protocol for advisories now and those are a little more conservative. We're issuing advisories based on fairly low levels when PCBs show up," said John Arway, chief of environmental services for the state Fish and Boat Commission. "Once those chemicals get into a system they take a very long time to go away."

He said Pennsylvania is working with other Great Lakes states on a common listing protocol for chlordane and mercury that should be in place by the end of the summer.