

PCBs in Housatonic bring state health warning

By Ralph E. Brown

The Massachusetts commissioner of public health today issued a "public health warning" against eating fish and frogs taken from the Housatonic River because they are contaminated with toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

And a regional environmental official said that groundwater supplies in Pittsfield and Lee have high enough levels of PCB contamination that they cannot be used for drinking water.

The moves follow a series of tests of fish, river sediment and groundwater conducted by the state Department of Environmental Quality Engineering.

Dr. Jonathan E. Fielding, who issued the health warning shortly before noon today, said that the warning applies to fish taken from the East Branch of the river from the Pittsfield-Dalton line to its confluence with the West Branch and from there all along the main course of the river from here to Connecticut.

Fielding said that Connecticut health officials are issuing a similar warning today covering the portion of the river from Massachusetts to Long Island Sound.

Connecticut health authorities, however, issued a warning about fish in one portion of the river as long ago as June, and Massachusetts officials began a stepped-up investigation of the river here

shortly after that.

Fielding this morning did not release details of the Massachusetts studies. Those were to be explained at a press briefing this afternoon at Berkshire Community College.

But Angelo Iantosca, the Western Massachusetts regional environmental engineer for the environmental quality engineering department, said this morning that fish taken from the river in the latest round of tests show PCB levels exceeded by five or six times the federally established limit of five parts per million.

Iantosca also said that PCBs have been detected in groundwater supplies in

Pittsfield and Lee at levels higher than a suggested limit for drinking water of one part per trillion.

Iantosca said that an April test of a Pittsfield groundwater supply off East Street showed a level of two parts per billion, well above the one-part-per-trillion level.

And tests of a well on property owned by the Peter J. Schweitzer Division of Kimberly Clark Corp. in Lee showed levels ranging from two parts per billion to nearly five parts per billion, Iantosca said.

"We wouldn't approve it for use" as drinking water, Iantosca said, referring to both water supplies.

Iantosca said that the April test is the only one of the Pittsfield water supply that has been analyzed. Another sample was taken last week, he said.

PCB, a substance that has been linked to cancer in laboratory animals, appears in a variety of products and for years was a component of an insulating fluid used by the General Electric Co. in the large power transformers it manufactures.

GE stopped using the substance in March, and since then has begun a major program to clean traces of the toxic chemical from anywhere it could turn up in its plant.

A GE spokesman said today that the company's only comment on the issuance of the health warning was that "we're committed to zero."

Although it no longer uses the chemical, small amounts of it that are remnants of former uses do seep into the Housatonic. GE has a federal discharge permit allowing the passage of up to four ounces of PCBs into the river daily but is trying to reduce that discharge to zero.

The New York state Department of Environmental Conservation was told just last week that it may cost \$150 million to clean PCBs from a 36-mile stretch of the Hudson River.

No estimates have been made of the cost of cleaning the Housatonic.