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River ducks full of PCBs

Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Mallard ducks take off from Woods Pond in Lenox after feeding on duckweed recently.

State set to issue a health advisory

By Theo Stein
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PCB levels in ducks collected along the Housatonic River near Woods Pond last fall by the Environmental Protection Agency were among the highest biologists have ever seen — hundreds of times higher than the federal government considers safe to eat.

Based on the new EPA data, the state Department of Public Health is expected to issue a public health advisory as early as today strongly warning sportsmen about the dangers of eating contaminated waterfowl. The state also is offering free screenings and blood tests for sportsmen who fear they may have ingested PCBs with their game.

Prominent signs warning against the consumption of fish, frogs and turtles taken from the river have been posted since 1982, but there has been no such advisory concerning ducks. Sportsmen have continued to eat the ducks they shoot each fall over the river.

Until now.

Hunters concerned

Chet Farmer, 51, of Lee said he eats about 30 ducks from the Housatonic every year.

"I've been eating ducks from the river for 25 years — a lot of them," he said last night at a small presentation by EPA project manager Susan Svirsky at the Lee Sportsmen's Club on Fairview Street.

"I'm very concerned. My family eats them. My kids eat them."

Farmer said he hunts both upstream and downstream of Woods Pond, the 104-acre impoundment above which most of the PCBs are believed to be lodged.

'If this is any indication of how this chemical compound has permeated that ecosystem,' Keefe said, 'it's extraordinary.'

The EPA data also show that the PCBs used by GE as an insulating fluid in transformers from 1930 to 1977 are being transported south each winter along the Atlantic flyway, concentrated in the fat of migrating ducks.

In fact, even ducks taken from an uncontaminated pond in Sheffield used for comparison had more PCBs on average than ducks studied on the contaminated Fox River near Green Bay, Wis., where the state has posted a consumption advisory.

"It's extraordinary," said Thomas Keefe, the western district manager of the Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, which owns the 818-acre Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area.

"If this is any indication of how this chemical compound has permeated that ecosystem, it's extraordinary."

DUCKS, continued on A7

Ducks from A1

The agency was particularly anxious to get the new data out to hunters, because the goose season opens in less than two weeks.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be notifying other waterfowl biologists up and down the East Coast.

Another state with a duck advisory, New York, has warned hunters to eat no more than two meals of duck a month because of contamination in the Hudson River, for which GE also is responsible.

Svirsky said PCB levels in Housatonic ducks were much higher than in either Hudson or Fox River waterfowl.

GE spokesman Gary Sheffer, a former New York Department of Environmental Conservation official, said yesterday it was "too early to draw conclusions."

"We will carefully review [the EPA data] and continue to work with [the] EPA and [Massachusetts], as we are working with them on other matters," Sheffer said.

He added that a 1997 blood serum study performed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health of people living near the Housatonic showed PCB levels similar to those found in the general public.

The release of the duck study represents the first salvo by the EPA of what promises to be a long fight with GE over how much of a cleanup, if any, the company should be ordered to perform on the Housatonic.

The river's mud has some of the highest PCB contamination of any American river and its fish show the highest PCB burdens anywhere in the country.

The study looked at 25 mallards and wood ducks collected from river backwaters upstream of Woods Pond in Lenox and 20 more from the 168-acre Three Mile Pond in Sheffield, an uncontaminated "reference area." Mallards and wood ducks are dabbling ducks and a favorite target of hunters.

All of the ducks collected from the river backwaters during the study showed elevated levels of PCBs in both their breast and liver tissue. PCB levels measured according to FDA testing practices averaged 648 parts per million in ducks collected from contaminated areas of the river.

Housatonic duck livers averaged 262 ppm, with a high of 985 ppm.

The FDA standard for poultry is 3 ppm, adjusted for fat content. Wisconsin is one state that has adopted the FDA poultry standard for waterfowl. Canada's federal Department of Health and Welfare has set a 0.5 ppm consumption standard.

On a strict weight basis, duck breast tissue averaged 7.1 ppm for Housatonic ducks, with a high of 19.4 ppm.

Svirsky said analysis of the duck tissue showed very low levels of pesticides and dioxins, but elevated levels of dibenzofurans, which are a byproduct of heating PCBs. She said the agency would evaluate this discovery further.

The EPA also will be analyzing which forms of the PCB molecule were present in the ducks. Polychlorinated biphenyls are a family of 209 distinct chemicals that vary in the number and placement of their chlorine atoms. The trade name for the PCBs used by GE — Aroclor 1260 or 1254 — refers to the percentage of chlorine in the mixture.

The chemical analysis was performed by the Texas A&M University lab, one of the nation's top research centers for organic contaminants.

The birds in the study, most hatched last year, were collected in August and September of 1998, dates selected to precede the start of migration. The study showed that even hatchlings absorb PCBs from the environment at a rapid rate.

The Department of Public Health, which has worked closely with the EPA on the matter, is expected to announce new guidelines for eating ducks today. Spokeswoman Rose Ann Pawelec said sportsmen and anyone else who wants more information on PCBs can call (800) 240-4266.

It would be the nation's third PCB-related waterfowl consumption advisory.

The EPA also is seeking people who may still eat fish, frogs, ducks or turtles from the river for its overall human health risk assessment, which is part of the not-yet-signed cleanup consent decree that negotiators have been working on for almost two years.

Svirsky said attempts to locate mink and otter along the main stem of the river last winter were essentially fruitless, though researchers found both animals abundant in uncontaminated river tributaries. The EPA is conducting additional studies of tree swallows, largemouth bass, fern fiddleheads, aquatic insects and other subjects.

The Housatonic River study did not look at mergansers, a fish-eating duck that dives after its prey. The EPA expects that mergansers would show even higher contamination levels because they eat only fish, which concentrate PCBs in their tissues by eating insects and smaller fish that forage in the contaminated sediments. But mergansers are generally not considered good eating.

Likewise, Canada geese were not studied. Biologists believe that geese, which graze in uplands away from water, would accumulate PCBs at a lower rate than dabblers like mallards.

Svirsky said the agency will also look at the migrating patterns of banded ducks. Keefe said mallards may fly only as far south as Long Island Sound, but wood ducks migrate to the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida.

Mark Jester, president of the Berkshire County League of Sportsmen, said sportsmen had long assumed Housatonic ducks were contaminated. But he said the high levels surprised them.

"I think people just didn't want to hear it," he said. "But there's no way around it now."

May also said that accounting seniors need help with health care