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Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

The Revere Canal runs behind David Consiglio's home in St. Clair Shores. The Revere and Lange street canals were the site of a \$6 million cleanup to remove PCBs.

PCBs detected in waterways

Experts call for careful removal of chemical

By Gene Schabath / *The Detroit News*

TRENTON -- More than 3 million cubic yards of cancer-causing PCBs remain in the sediment in Metro Detroit and southeast Michigan waterways, and it could take as much as \$100 million to remove the contaminants, according to a report prepared by more than 50 scientists and researchers from the United States and Canada.

Despite the new findings, no one is believed to have died from the chemical, and the risk to humans is considered low, said Thomas M. Heidtke, one of the 50 scientists and one of two who compiled the group's findings for the report, published in April by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The PCBs would be a more serious health risk to humans, fish, birds and the environment if they were disturbed by events such as a massive storm, Heidtke said.

"We had a once-in-300-years storm about 15 years ago that spread PCBs (from the land) all over southern Saginaw Bay," said scientist John Hartig, another of the 50 researchers who worked on the study. "We need to clean up (Metro Detroit PCB hot spots) before we have a big storm event like that in our area."

Dredging is less of a concern when it comes to PCBs, he added. "We have a number of new technologies that are far superior to the old way of dredging. (State and federal environmental agencies) won't allow those old methods to be used anymore."

If removed, the amount of PCBs would cover Belle Isle with 2 feet of the contaminated sediment, scientists said. Polychlorinated biphenyl, more commonly

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called PCB, was banned by the federal government in 1977 because it posed a health threat.

The Detroit River, Rouge River and River Raisin near Monroe are considered major "hot spots" for PCBs among the 50 scientists and technical experts involved in the study, funded by the EPA, Hartig said. The Trenton Channel in the Detroit River is considered the worst.

The largest potential for harm is in fish that Metro Detroiters consume from tainted waterways. For now, the risk is low.

"We're not talking about a significant increase in the risk of cancer," said Heidtke, an associate professor with the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Wayne State University. "But if for any reason those sediments in the hot spots are disturbed, there could be a significant release of PCBs in the ecosystem. That has the potential to raise the levels of PCBs in birds, fish and people.

Falling water levels on the Great Lakes also are a concern and also disturb PCBs in bottom sediments, said Hartig, river navigator for the Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative, a program aimed at improving the Detroit River.

"When a big freighter goes through the Rouge River, which is one of our hot spots, it will stir up those sediments," Hartig said.

Cleanup of waterways in Metro Detroit and southeast Michigan during the last 30 years, and the PCB ban, significantly lowered PCB levels in local walleye, Heidtke said. But carp, drum or suckers, fish that feed on the bottom of lakes and rivers and may live in a hot spot because they tend to stay in one area, are more dangerous because they tend to have much higher concentrations of PCBs.

"Those fish are consumed," even though people aren't supposed to eat the fish, Heidtke said.

Researchers concluded in the 130-page report that the solution to the problem is to remove the PCBs by dredging.

"They have to do what they did in St. Clair Shores," Hartig said.

The Lange and Revere street canals near 10 Mile and Jefferson were the site of a \$6 million EPA cleanup to remove PCBs above 10 parts per million from July 29, 2002, to March 21.

The project involved the excavation and disposal of 23,000 tons of contaminated sediment from the mile-long 10 Mile Drain storm sewer system and two canals totaling about 1,600 feet, said Tom Skinner, an EPA administrator.

High-concentration PCB materials were sent to Wayne Disposal in Belleville and nonhazardous materials went to a landfill in Lenox Township, Skinner said.

About \$130 million has been spent in the last 10 years removing PCBs from area rivers, lakes and other waterways in Southeast Michigan, Hartig said. The most expensive project was the dredging of the Willow Run Creek in the Ypsilanti area of the Huron River. It cost \$70 million to remove more than 330,000 cubic yards of sediment tainted with PCBs.

Hartig, an adjunct professor of civil and environmental engineering at Wayne State University, estimates it will cost about \$100 million to purge the 3 million cubic yards of PCBs from area waterways.

Without the cleanup, scientists fear the PCBs eventually could become a problem.

Detroit News Staff Writers Tony Manolatos, Marisa Schultz and Mike Wowk contributed to this report. You can reach Gene Schabath at (586) 468-3614 or gscshabath@detnews.com.

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Danger zones

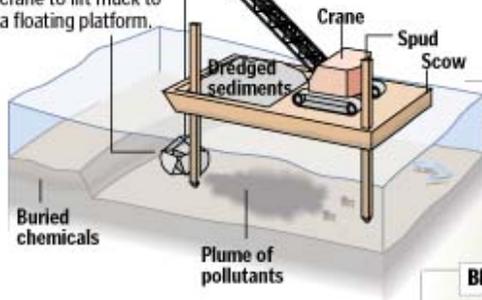
Two scientists have identified spots throughout Metro Detroit that have high levels of PCBs. Environmentalists say that the PCBs could become a health threat if they circulate in the water.

Dredging's hidden perils

To make room for boats in shallow harbors and shipping channels, dredging machines scoop or suck away sediments. This disturbs deadly chemicals buried in the sediment.

Clamshell bucket

Technique uses crane to lift muck to a floating platform.



Problems in the food chain

Muck tainted with PCBs, oils and pesticides must be dumped in regulated holding areas, but dredging experts admit pollution escapes even during careful operations. Carried by currents, chemicals can work their way into the food chain. They are ingested by small fish and organisms, then travel to game fish, which are eaten by shore birds, mammals and people.

Sources: Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



Tim Summers / The Detroit News

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