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Foul fish may extend to Neuse

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Signs warning people about eating contaminated fish now cover a much longer stretch of Crabtree Creek, and investigators next plan to test in the Neuse for tainted fish.

State health officials found levels of industrial chemicals called PCBs in largemouth bass, catfish and carp in Crabtree Creek as part of an Environmental Protection Agency investigation of Ward Transformer, a long-contaminated industrial site near Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

Although the levels were lower than those found in fish in Lake Crabtree County Park, they were high enough to prompt a state warning to limit eating certain fish from the creek to no more than once a month. More frequent consumption over time might increase a person's risk of developing cancer, infection or skin problems, state health officials say.

"I really did not expect to see these levels that far down," said Luanne Williams, a toxicologist with the state Department of Health and Human Services. "The questions that still remain are the levels in catfish and largemouth bass in the creeks that lead to Crabtree Creek. Fish can swim upstream from Crabtree Creek to these creeks."

Williams said officials can't say for sure that the PCBs found in fish in Crabtree Creek came from Ward because of the distance. One sampling point was 15 miles downstream from Ward Transformer. "It may be Ward, or it may be other sources," she said.

After emerging from Lake Crabtree County Park, the creek flows through Umstead State Park and behind Crabtree Valley Mall before eventually reaching the Neuse. This spring, the state and the EPA plan to collect and test fish in tributaries that flow into Crabtree Creek and in the Neuse River.

Ward is one of about 35 sites in North Carolina on the EPA's Superfund list, which targets the nation's worst pollution cases. The company worked on electrical transformers. Its method of handling the oil drained from the devices in the 1960s and 1970s led to widespread contamination of the site and nearby creeks with polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs.

The chemicals were used as coolants before being banned because they accumulate in the environment and pose health risks.

Who will pay?

A legal settlement, approved last year by the U.S. Department of Justice, calls for Ward Transformer and its customers to put up \$5.4 million to cover the cleanup cost at the 11-acre industrial site. The aim is to stop the further spread of pollution and to protect public health.

The EPA is reviewing a cleanup proposal, said Luis Flores, EPA's project manager for the Ward site. The plan calls for excavating contaminated soil at the site this summer.

But the cleanup operation does not cover the bodies of water downstream from Ward, including Lake Crabtree and Crabtree Creek. Those waterways are still being studied.

Breanna Peterson, field organizer for Environment North Carolina, an environmental advocacy group, said the Lake Crabtree situation is an example of how polluters have gotten off the hook.

"If these companies don't pick up the tab for the pollution they have caused, the federal government will have to decide between leaving Lake Crabtree toxic or passing the bill for corporate pollution onto taxpayers," Peterson said.

The EPA's Flores said it is too soon to say what kind of cleanup will be required in the bodies of water downstream from Ward. Typically, he said, the EPA tries to get the polluter to pay.

When the Superfund program was created in 1980, it was largely supported by taxes charged to polluting industries, paid as fees on purchases of crude oil and certain toxic chemicals. But Congress allowed the fees to expire in 1995, when the Superfund trust fund had about \$3.8 billion in unused money. The money has since been spent, and Congress has increasingly turned to general tax dollars to pay cleanup costs.

Environment North Carolina, which supports reinstating the taxes, estimates that North Carolina taxpayers will pay more than \$35 million in 2006 to clean up after polluters at toxic waste sites on the nation's Superfund list.

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