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Fishermen alerted to PCBs

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Article Text:

Lake Crabtree, a popular Wake County recreation spot, has become the first in North Carolina to post warnings about eating fish tainted by PCBs.

The Environmental Protection Agency found high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, an oily, toxic chemical, in catfish and carp in the lake -- and in Brier Creek, which feeds it -- during an investigation of Ward Transformer Sales & Service Inc. The company is linked to one of the state's most infamous pollution cases.

EPA officials are studying the extent of pollution to develop a cleanup plan for the 11-acre Ward site, which was put on the national priority list for investigation in April 2003.

Investigators have found elevated levels of toxic chemicals, most notably PCBs, on the Ward site in an industrial area near Raleigh-Durham International Airport and in adjacent streams. Before 1972, stormwater runoff from the site was uncontrolled.

PCBs were added to oil in transformers and other electrical equipment to retard fires until their manufacture was stopped in the United States in 1977 and banned in 1979. They build up in the bodies of animals, move up the food chain and can cause health problems such as skin irritation,

liver damage and cancer.

Luis Flores, project manager for the Ward investigation in the EPA's Atlanta office, said the agency can't say definitively that the PCBs in Lake Crabtree came only from Ward Transformer, but it is a likely source. "We haven't really finished the investigation," Flores said. "I guess at this point we don't know of any other source of PCBs in the area."

Dr. Luanne Williams, a toxicologist with the state Department of Health and Human Services, said the contamination levels in Lake Crabtree fish were similar to those found in fish upstream in Brier Creek Reservoir. She has asked the EPA to follow the trail of waterborne pollution farther and test fish from Crabtree Creek. The creek drains Lake Crabtree and flows east through Umstead State Park.

"Right now, we don't know what the levels are in that park," Williams said.

Stocking stopped

Park rangers have posted 26 signs in English and Spanish around Lake Crabtree warning the public not to eat catfish or carp, and to limit meals of other fish from the lake to no more than one a month. They also put up 10 signs not to eat any fish from Brier Creek.

They have handed out fliers in English and Spanish as well. A good portion of the visitors are Hispanic.

"The primary concern is from consuming the fish," Williams said. "The fish can concentrate the PCBs at much higher levels than what is found in the sediment and water."

The levels of contamination in the sediment and water do not pose a risk to people, Williams said.

The latest confirmation of contamination follows findings in December of fish with high levels of PCBs in the lower reaches of Little Brier Creek (downstream of Brier Creek Parkway), Brier Creek Reservoir and an unnamed tributary, all downstream from Ward and upstream of Lake Crabtree.

While those creeks are remote and fished infrequently, Lake Crabtree County Park attracts 250,000 to 300,000 visitors a year. About 10 percent of them come to fish, Park Manager Drew Cade estimated.

Besides posting warning signs, Cade said, the county discontinued its practice of stocking the lake with catfish and keeping the fish feeders filled to attract fish.

"We have decided it's not the best use of resources to fatten fish up in a lake when we don't want people to consume them," Cade said.

Slim Broadwell of Raleigh, an apartment maintenance worker and avid fisherman, came to the park Thursday to fish on his day off and was "not real happy," he said, to see the advisories posted near the pier.

"I wouldn't be able to eat what I caught," Broadwell said as he watched a fish nibble his bait, causing the bobber to wiggle in the water. "I like eating them."

Cade said the park couldn't prevent people from eating what they caught but would promote "catch-and-release" fishing instead.

"You can handle the fish," he said. "The water is safe. You have to consume the flesh to get the contamination."

\$20 million spent

Flores, the EPA project manager, said the agency has not estimated the cost of the Ward superfund cleanup.

Over the years, contamination from Ward Transformer has cost taxpayers close to \$20 million.

Robert E. Ward III, president of the company, could not be reached for comment.

The Ward Transformer plant caught the state's attention in 1978 after a contractor hired by the company sprayed 30,000 gallons of oil contaminated

with PCBs along more than 200 miles of rural roadsides in 14 counties. That year, new federal rules had restricted the disposal of PCBs, significantly raising the cost of legal disposal.

The illegal spraying caused a health panic. State workers dug up the contaminated soil and buried it in a landfill in Warren County over vehement objections of residents there.

Robert "Buck" Ward, father of the company's current president, eventually was convicted of federal charges involving illegal dumping of toxic waste, and served nine months in a federal prison. He died in 1996.

In October 1999, the federal and state governments recouped \$3.5 million from the estate of "Buck" Ward to cover the cost of cleaning up the roadsides and building a landfill. The Warren County PCB landfill recently was decontaminated and closed at a cost of \$18 million.

Ward's current process of reconditioning transformers complies with environmental regulations, state officials said. However, the process that the company used from 1964 to 1979 allowed PCBs to escape into the environment.

Federal investigators took water and soil samples from the plant site in 1978-1979 and 1993, but they said the levels of contamination found did not pose a threat to public health that required immediate removal. In 1997, state investigators found contamination in a stream and wetlands below the site and recommended further action, which required listing on the Superfund national priority list.

Caption:

Lake Crabtree attracts 250,000 to 300,000 visitors a year, 10 percent of them fishermen such as Alfredo Marmolejo of Raleigh, park officials estimate. The park is encouraging 'catch-and-release' fishing -- fishing for sport alone, not for food.

Staff Photo by Robert Willett

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