Preventing Exposure to PCBs in the Ten Mile/Lange/Revere Canals

Prepared by the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Control,
Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH),
and Macomb County Health Department

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is investigating the PCB contamination in the Ten Mile Drain system in St. Clair Shores. PCBs are chemicals that were used as coolants and lubricants in transformers and other electrical equipment. Many years ago, PCBs were released into the environment and are still found in our lakes, soil, and air.

PCBs are in the sediments at the bottom of the Ten Mile/Lange/Revere canals and the drain discharging to the canals. Sediments are the soil under the water at the bottom of the canals. PCBs have also been found in fish sampled from the Ten Mile/Lange/Revere canals.

Can PCBs harm my health?
Brief contact with PCBs is not a problem for most people. However, continued and long-term contact may cause health problems such as cancer or diabetes.

How might I be exposed to PCBs?
The most likely way for you to be exposed to PCBs from the canals is by eating fish from the canals.

At this time, we strongly recommend that people do not eat fish from the Ten Mile/Lange/Revere canals. Fish from these canals have been tested for PCBs. The test results are far higher than the level that is safe for people.

At this time, we also recommend that people do not eat carp or catfish from Lake St. Clair. For information about eating fish from the Ten Mile/Lange/Revere canals or Lake St. Clair, please go to www.michigan.gov/eatsafefish. Go to the Go Local section to find information about eating fish from the St. Clair Shores area.

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Other ways to be exposed to PCBs include breathing air containing PCBs, and touching or swallowing soil or sediments containing PCBs.

- ✓ Air: During the emergency removal of the PCB-contaminated sediments in 2002, the EPA conducted air monitoring. Very low levels of PCBs were occasionally found in the air, but the levels were not harmful to human health. It is not expected that there are harmful levels of PCBs in the air now.
- ✓ Soil: The EPA removed contaminated soil in the Bon Brae/Bon Heur area in 2006. During the ongoing investigation, the EPA and its contractors take steps to prevent the public from coming into contact with soil that is being sampled.
- ✓ Sediments: People may be exposed to the PCB-contaminated sediments if they go into the canals to work on their boat slips or docks or for any other reason. Infrequent contact with contaminated sediments is not expected to cause harm.

Should canal water be used in my yard?

As we recommended in the September 2010 EPA fact sheet, "Health Concerns and PCBs: Questions and Answers", you should wait until the source of the PCB contamination is located and secured. It's possible that pumping water from the canals may disturb the sediments contaminated with PCBs and move them to your yard.

Should I swim in the canal?

You should wait until EPA's investigation and cleanup of the PCB contamination in the Ten Mile drain system and canals are completed before swimming in the canals. And, as a general health and safety measure, you should only swim at beaches or recreational areas where water quality is monitored and where lifeguards are on duty.

Protect yourself, your family, and the St. Clair waterway by avoiding activities that are likely to stir up and move sediments throughout the canal. This includes going into the canals to work on docks or boat slips.

What about other canals?

When the PCBs were first discovered in the drain system in 2001, the Macomb County Public Works Office tested its outfalls in other canals along Lake St. Clair and found no PCB contamination.

Dredging permits require that sediments are tested to be sure they are disposed of properly. Testing results have not shown levels of concern in other canals.

Where can I get more information?

For answers to questions about the dredging permits, contact Andrew Hartz at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Warren office, (586) 753-3867. For health questions related to PCB exposure, contact Christina Bush at the Michigan Department of Community Health, (800) 648-6942.