

Kimberly hosts forum on health dangers of PCBs

By Ed Culhane

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KIMBERLY — Despite the 11th-hour cancellations of key government speakers, more than 160 people showed up Monday evening to hear about the detrimental health effects of Fox River PCBs and how dredging is an option in cleaning up the river.

Warren Porter, a professor of zoology at the University of Wisconsin, took the audience on a tour

of pollution history and then zeroed in on the molecules of the animal and human cell, where the basic processes of life occur.

He explained how man-made chemicals, even at extremely minute levels, can disrupt those processes, causing the nervous system, for example, to produce hormones that suppress the body's immune system, making it more susceptible to disease.

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"PCBs are an immune suppressant," he said.

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are long-lasting, man-made chemicals used in electrical equipment and in the manufacture of carbonless papers. Area paper mills discharged tons of these chemicals into the Fox River from 1957 to 1971, when they were banned.

PCBs cling to soil particles in the river and are slowly released into the aquatic environment where they accumulate in fish and move up the food chain. They have been linked to deformities in wild animals, increased risk of cancer in humans and developmental problems in the children of mothers who eat contaminated fish.

In a pregnant woman, PCBs and other chemicals, such as those found in commercial weed killers and pesticides, induce changes in thyroid activity that affect growth rates in the fetus, according to Porter.

"If the thyroid level gets jacked up, or suppressed, that crosses the placenta, affecting the thyroid hormone in the fetus in ways that can affect brain development permanently," Porter said.

He said federal health agencies are not even subjecting these chemicals to the type of tests that would mimic real-life exposure.

He said his research shows that "pulse dosing" or the concentrated spurts at which toxins enter the body, is harmful at much lower levels than traditional testing methods show.

Other research demonstrates that these health effects don't occur in a biological vacuum.

For instance, a healthy, well-fed person who is well stocked with immune agents might sustain a



Post-Crescent photo by Sharon Oskada

SOME OF THE MORE than 160 attendees of a public forum Monday in Kimberly listen intently to information about the harmful health effects of PCBs.

"pulse dose" of PCBs or dioxins with no measurable harm, while a malnourished person, or one whose immune system has been slightly suppressed, could be injured by the same dose.

Man-made chemicals released into the environment are likely to cause a host of human ailments, from birth defects and learning disabilities to aggressive behavior, adult onset diabetes and cancer, Porter said.

If chemical contamination persists, he said, society will experience heightened levels of aggressive behavior by individuals whose nervous systems have been altered, there will be more cases of adult onset diabetes, more species of animals will become extinct and there will be higher rates of cancer in children.

The public forum was sponsored

by the Sierra Club and the Clean Water Action Council, with support from area fishing clubs and conservation organizations.

It had been scheduled by the state Department of Natural Resources, which canceled it.

Outraged at the cancellation, environmentalists resurrected the meeting and obtained commitments from three of the four speakers recruited by the DNR.

But all three of those speakers canceled last week, leaving Porter as the only technical speaker on the agenda. Environmentalists charged that the government health agencies bowed to political pressure.

Three staff members of the Sierra Club filled in for the missing government health experts.

Eric Uram presented research that he said shows 60% of women who eat contaminated fish from

Lake Michigan are not aware of health advisories on those fish. Eight of 10 fishermen from minority ethnic groups are also unaware of them.

Brett Hulsey showed slides of cormorants with twisted beaks, and said scientists found 40 times the number of these deformities in Green Bay birds as compared with other parts of the Great Lakes.

He said that two separate studies, one on Lake Michigan and the other on Lake Erie, show that the children of mothers who regularly eat contaminated fish from Lake Michigan have lower birth weights, lower reading and math comprehension scores, and lower IQ scores at the age of 11.

"We are starting to build a large body of evidence. The polluters can't deny they are hurting people anymore," Hulsey said.

Emily Green, of the Sierra Club's Clean Sediments Project, said cleanup projects in other areas of the country show that dredging can be accomplished without stirring up the sediments.

The most contentious cleanup issue, she said, will be the manner in which the dredge soils are handled. The Sierra Club supports innovative treatment technologies that destroy the PCBs, but acknowledges that these are terribly expensive.

As a fall-back position, the Sierra Club supports placing the PCBs in landfills on property owned and managed by the paper companies who discharged the chemicals.

Whatever happens, she said, will depend on the public.

"This cleanup won't happen without the support of the people of the Fox Valley," she said. "It hasn't moved anywhere where citizens haven't played an active role."