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Disturbing dioxin finding

Environment Minister Keith Norton's attempts this week to assure the public there is no health hazard posed by the small amounts of dioxin found in some Lake Ontario fish are far from comforting. The very fact that this deadliest of all chemicals has shown up in any amount in Lake Ontario — whether it is below the danger level or not — is cause for great concern.

Norton has disclosed that a few fish taken from Lake Ontario — trout, bass, perch and smelt — showed small amounts of dioxin ranging from 10 to 19 parts per trillion. He also revealed that federal tests of a small number of eel and smelt taken from eastern Lake Ontario indicated the occasional presence of dioxin levels in excess of 20 parts per trillion. The federal government has established that 20 parts per trillion is the level at which a "health advisory" should be issued to those eating the fish.

On the basis of the tests, the minister says the dioxin was not present at levels which are a health threat to the aquatic environment.

But with all his testing, Norton seems to have overlooked an important point: The presence of even minute quantities of lethal dioxin in the water of Lake Ontario, from which 6 million people obtain their drinking water every day, is alarming news.

The provincial and federal governments should be doing everything in their power to ensure that not another drop of the chemical enters Lake Ontario.

The source of the dioxin has by now been traced to three major sites: Hooker Chemical at Niagara Falls, N.Y.; the nearby Olin Chemical plant; and the Dow Chemical factory in Michi-

gan. Though Hooker and Olin have both abandoned the production of chemicals that produce dioxin, their storage dumps and disposal pipes are known to contain hundreds of pounds of the material, some of which appears to have found its way into Lake Ontario.

Researchers are well aware of the hazards presented by this chemical, which is a byproduct in the production of weedkillers and disinfectants. One-quarter of an ounce of dioxin mixed in water can kill 5 million people. In lesser amounts it can cause damage to the spleen, liver, lungs, brain and central nervous system and cause cancer and birth defects.

Its effects were terrifyingly demonstrated in 1976 when a chemical plant in Italy exploded and sent four pounds of dioxin into the surrounding countryside. The result: Disease, scarring and crippling, the death of more than 40,000 animals and the total evacuation of hundreds of Italian inhabitants, most of whom have not been allowed back to their homes to this day. Scientists speculate the chemical may cause problems in the area for another 20 to 30 years.

In a similar occurrence, hundreds of U.S. residents living near the Love Canal in upstate New York were forced to leave their homes when extremely high levels of the chemical were found to have leaked from the Hooker Chemical dump in 1978.

Consequently this week's provincial government announcement once again raises the warning signals about the dangers of dioxin. As the American Environmental Agency has pointed out, there is *no* safe level for the chemical.