The FDA is responsible for ensuring the safety and wholesomeness of all foods sold in interstate commerce except for meat, poultry, and eggs, all of which are under U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) jurisdiction. The USDA and the FDA have been routinely inspecting fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, eggs, grains, fish, animal feeds, and processed foods for high concentrations of PCBs. The tolerance level for PCBs in fish and shellfish was set at 2 ppm in 1985 (The FDA develops standards for the composition, quality, nutrition, and safety of foods, including food and color additives).

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are virtually indestructible pollutants produced by people and now found in food and water sources. For almost 50 years, this toxic chemical has been used in numerous products. Each year, millions of pounds of PCBs have been dumped into rivers and waterways through industrial waste disposal and accidental spills, leaked into the soil from trash in dumps and landfills, and carried into the air from burning of waste and vapor escaping from paints and varnishes. PCBs are chemically stable and not easily broken down. Complete destruction requires temperatures above 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Once PCBs are incorporated into fish, animals, and other foodstuffs, they cannot be eliminated by processing.

About 1.4 billion pounds of PCBs were produced in the United States between 1929 and 1977. Although the United States production of PCBs has ceased, it is estimated that 450 million pounds of PCBs exist in the environment, and 750 million pounds of PCBs are still in industrial and domestic use.

Some people, however, feel that no level of contamination is acceptable. The FDA regulates the use of PCBs in equipment and machinery employed in food and animal feed production and food packaging and storage materials. Regulations are necessary since there have been cases of PCB contamination of various foodstuffs from herbicides, paper wrappers, and cartons, and transfer fluid leakage.

PCBs pose a great threat to freshwater fish because it is extremely difficult to eliminate the PCBs already present in waterways. PCBs also tend to accumulate in the fatty tissue and flesh of fish and other animals that eat them. Freshwater fish most affected with PCBs include: coho and chinook salmon, steelhead trout, striped and small-mouth bass, carp, eel, rockbass, catfish, alewife, and lake trout. Even in the late 1980s, a two-year study funded by FDA revealed that people who eat Lake Michigan fish had more PCBs in their blood than people who do not; however, long-range effects on human health have not been confirmed.

For added information review the activity "Which fish can we eat?" in this book.

Websites:
- Catalog of FDA Information For Consumers Publications and Audiovisuals – http://www.fda.gov/opacom/catalog/decemcat.html
- FDA Seafood hotline – http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~lrd/seafood.html; Phone: 1-800-332-4010 (1-800-FDA-4010)

FDA Public Affairs Specialists in the Midwest Region:
- Chicago: FDA, 300 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 550 – South, Chicago IL 60606; Ph. ((312) 353-5863 (ext. 188).
- Detroit: FDA, 1560 East Jefferson Avenue, Detroit, MI 48207 Ph. (313) 226-6260 (ext 149).
- Indianapolis: FDA, 101 W. Ohio St., Indianapolis, IN 46204; Ph. (317) 226-6500 (ext. 13).
- Minneapolis: FDA, 240 Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55401; Ph. (612) 334-4100 (ext. 129).
- Milwaukee: FDA, 2675 North Mayfair Road, Suite 200, Milwaukee, WI 53226 1305; Ph. (414) 771-7167

For the most up-to-date information on fish restrictions, contact the Michigan Department of Community Health, Division of Environmental Epidemiology, 1-800-648-6942 (in Michigan), or (517) 335-8350.