

5 HOOKED IN TOXIC-FISH SALES RING

By AL GUART

Something's fishy in Gotham.

The feds netted five fish companies and five people yesterday on charges of selling more than 100,000 pounds of tainted striped bass, culled from the Hudson River, to the city's finest restaurants and clubs.

The fish, consumed at "prominent and elegant" eateries and clubs throughout the city, were found to contain PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, a toxin formerly used in manufacturing, the feds charged.

The murky scheme centered on New Jersey fisherman Ronald Ingold, who pleaded guilty last December to catching the bass in gill nets set out each spring just under the George Washington Bridge, the feds alleged.

Ingold told probers from the National Marine Fisheries Service that between 1990 and 1998, he sold more than 100,000 pounds of wild striped bass to Marlen Fish Corp. and M.V. Perretti, two firms in the Fulton Fish Market, the complaint charged.

The two firms, owned by Michael Perretti, 36, of Short Hills, N.J., bought the poisoned fish for \$1.25 per pound.

Probers in May 1998 secretly watched Ingold place the bass in ice-filled boxes labeled "Bucks" or "Bux," a name for male shad, to avoid detection. They tailed Ingold, who drove a 1968 Chevy pickup from his Edgewater, N.J., dock to Perretti's firm.

Records seized from Perretti revealed the fish were sold to M. Slavin and Sons, Gotham Seafood and F. Rozzo & Sons, for up to \$2.25 per pound.

The firms then sold the fish to top restaurants around town. One unidentified restaurant that bought the toxic fish charged \$36 for "striped bass stewed in seaweed," the complaint alleged.

"These customers included numerous prominent and elegant

Feds: Bass from Hudson served in posh eateries

restaurants and private clubs located in Manhattan," the complaint charged.

"Professional fishermen and especially fish purveyors should know better and be ashamed of themselves for selling bass caught in this area," said Michael O'Keefe, owner of Brooklyn's River Cafe. "Too many restaurants are selling them fresh out of the river."

Perretti, 36, and four others were charged with violating a federal law that bans the sale of wildlife when the sale violates state law.

Also charged was John McGuire, 44, who, when arrested, allegedly told a federal agent he "would get to know members of Russian organized crime," Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph DeMarco said.

In New York and New Jersey it is illegal to sell striped bass pulled from unapproved waters — such as the lower Hudson River. State law requires striped bass offered for sale to be tagged to show it came from healthy commercial waters.

For the past 20 years, the Hudson has been deemed PCB-contaminated, largely because a number of factories discharged the oily industrial insulator into the river.

PCBs build up in the body over time and are believed to cause cancer. Pregnant women are urged to avoid eating striped bass.

The defendants, who face up to five years in prison and \$250,000 in fines, were arraigned in Manhattan federal court and released on bond. The firms face up to \$500,000 in fines.