

From: water_news-admin@water.ca.gov on behalf of Cohen, Jeff [jcohen@water.ca.gov]
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Subject: 1. DWR'S CALIFORNIA WATER NEWS - Top Topic for 9/3/04: Top Topic: American River Mercury Pollution

California Department of Water Resources

California Water News

A daily compilation for DWR personnel of significant news articles and comment

September 3, 2004

Top Topic: American River Mercury Pollution

Mercury warning for Lake Natoma

Advisory to curb eating of some fish also applies to lower American River.

Sacramento Bee - 9/3/04

By Stuart Leavenworth, staff writer

The river that gave birth to the California Gold Rush is now so polluted with toxic mercury that state officials are advising people to limit the fish they eat from Lake Natoma and the lower American River.

Making final an advisory it drafted in April, the California Environmental Protection Agency urged children and women of childbearing age on Thursday not to eat any channel catfish from Lake Natoma or the river below it, and to limit consumption of bass and other fish.

Folsom Lake is not immediately affected, but Cal-EPA officials say people should also be careful what they eat from those waters.

"Fish are still recommended as part of a healthy, balanced diet," said Joan Denton, director of Cal-EPA's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. But people, particularly children and younger women, need to be careful about certain fish, she said.

Mercury, a toxic metal that builds up in the food chain, attacks the central nervous system and can cause blurred vision, loss of coordination, hearing problems and even blindness. Studies suggest that children and developing fetuses are especially vulnerable.

Four years ago, scientists for the U.S. Geological Survey and other agencies began finding mercury in Lake Natoma fish that exceeded federal health standards.

Tests from 2000 through 2003 found mercury as high as 1.02 parts per million in bass and 1.89 ppm in channel catfish. Those levels are several times the EPA's health criteria for mercury (0.3 ppm) and exceed the Food and Drug Administration action level for mercury in commercially caught seafood - 1 ppm.

Charles Alpers, a USGS scientist who conducted the tests, said mercury levels in Natoma catfish "were higher than we have seen anywhere else in California." Catfish in the study were relatively old and large, he noted, which is why they may have accumulated so much of the contaminant.

To get the word out, Sacramento County in April started translating the draft fishing advisories into different languages, said Dr. Glennah Trochet, the county's public health officer.

County officials posted the advisories at Lake Natoma and distributed them to community organizations, said Trochet.

Health officers are targeting Asian, Russian and Latino anglers - groups that tend to eat a lot of the fish they catch.

The advisory issued Thursday includes specific consumption suggestions for different fish and different groups of people, not just children and women of childbearing age. A copy can be found at www.oehha.ca.gov.

Salmon and trout, two of the most popular local sport fish, tend to accumulate relatively low levels of mercury, say scientists.

As a result, most people can safely eat those fish three times a week from Lake Natoma and the river, according to the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.

Women of childbearing age can eat them once a week.

Scientists suspect that Alder and Willow creeks - two tributaries that flow through gold fields into Lake Natoma - are responsible for much of the mercury in the reservoir.

During the Gold Rush, miners used mercury to separate gold from ore. State geologists have estimated that about 8.5 million pounds of the toxic metal were dumped into the environment.

Some has since naturally converted into methylmercury, the most toxic form.

So far, scientists haven't intensively studied mercury level in Folsom Lake, a popular spot for boating and bass derbies.

Given its location - downstream of where gold was discovered in 1848 - it probably has mercury problems, said Alpers.

In the absence of hard data, Cal-EPA officials suggest that people follow this general advice for consumption of fish caught from Folsom Lake: Children and women of childbearing age should eat no more than one meal a week; others should eat no more than three meals a week.

Mercury fishing advisory

Where: For Lake Natoma, nearby creeks and ponds, the lower American River (Lake Natoma to Discovery Park)

Who: Women of childbearing age and children ages 17 and younger

Warning: Do not eat channel catfish. Limit white catfish, all bass, pikeminnow and sucker to one meal a month. Limit bluegill and sunfish to once a week.

Who: Women beyond childbearing age and men

Warning: Limit channel catfish and all bass to one meal a month. Limit white catfish, pikeminnow and sucker to once a week.

For more information, go to www.oehha.ca.gov

Source: *Cal-EPA, Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment #*

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