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State issues warning on mercury levels in fish caught locally

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Published 12:00 am PDT Friday, April 18, 2008

State scientists are recommending that children and women who are pregnant or breast-feeding avoid eating bass and sturgeon caught in the Sacramento River and upper Delta because of mercury contamination.

This warning is the latest in a series of advisories issued over the years for fish that can accumulate mercury washed from long-abandoned gold mines.

This time, however, researchers did more than just examine fish tissue. They checked the other end of the fishing lines – the anglers.

Many of them were bagging species not usually included in fish consumption reports: pikeminnow, hitch, sucker, carp, goldfish and Asiatic clams. Researchers previously had targeted more popular game fish such as striped bass, sturgeon, trout and salmon.

"We didn't realize we were speaking in different tongues," Robert Brodberg, a toxicologist in the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, which issued a draft of the eating guide earlier this week.

Representatives of ethnic and low-income communities said they appreciated being asked.

"Fish is our main source of food," said Lim Leang, board officer for United Cambodian Families, a nonprofit group in Stockton, home to most of San Joaquin County's 24,000 Cambodian immigrants.

To develop the guidelines, researchers collected more than 3,200 specimens from as many as 86 sites, from Shasta Dam to Rio Vista. They individually measured and weighed fish and shellfish and analyzed tissues for contaminants, including levels of mercury.

Mercury impairs the nervous system, particularly in fetuses and children. There are no known ways to prepare or cook fish to reduce mercury hazard, state officials said.

The latest report, and a companion guide for the southern Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Joaquin River issued last fall, are the first studies to reach beyond laboratories to bait-and-bucket anglers on the riverbanks.

"We were trying to make things match up a little better," Brodberg said Thursday.

For the latest studies, the hazard assessment office – the scientific arm of the California Environmental Protection Agency – and the state Department of Public Health involved community groups.

"Staff talked with subsistence fishermen and got information on where they were fishing and what they were catching," Brodberg said.

That helped researchers determine the species they needed to examine and where to collect them.

In interviewing anglers, officials also learned they had been underestimating by half the typical serving size of river-caught fish.

An uncooked fillet averaged 8 ounces – double the weight state officials had assumed using federal nutrition guidelines, Brodberg said.

The new warning says it's safe to eat one serving of striped bass or sturgeon a month.

Andria Ventura, a program manager for the Clean Water Action public interest group, said she pushed for the revision.

"We wanted to make sure the guidelines reflected what people actually ate, not what the federal government says is good for your diet," Ventura said.

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