



Date: May 21, 2009

General questions: Jim Sellers, 503-945-5738

Technical questions: Barbara L. Stifel, DHS, 971-673-0429; Bob Schwarz, DEQ, 541-298-7255 ext. 30; Mark Dasso, Army Corps of Engineers, 503-808-4728

Advisory warns of high PCB levels in smallmouth bass above Bonneville Dam

People who eat fish caught in the Columbia River are being urged to limit consumption of smallmouth bass caught from Bonneville Dam upstream to Ruckel Creek.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers analyses of smallmouth bass in that area found elevated levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and mercury. Both are long-lasting chemicals that can transfer from mother to unborn child in utero or through breast-feeding, which can harm a baby's developing brain or nervous system.

As a result of the Army Corps analyses, the Oregon Department of Human Services is urging all consumers to limit consumption of smallmouth bass from those waters to one meal per month. (This is defined as eight ounces of uncooked fish for a 155-pound adult and two ounces for a 30-pound child; a meal appropriate to your body size is about the size and thickness of your hand). Although this advisory applies to all consumers, it is especially important for pregnant and nursing women, those who plan to become pregnant, and small children.

Barbara Stifel, environmental health specialist in the DHS Public Health Division, says DHS advises consumers to clean, fillet and remove the skin of the fish before cooking, allowing fats to drip from the meat while cooking. The back and belly fat, skin and internal organs contain the bulk of the PCBs in smallmouth bass and should be discarded. Consumers should avoid eating smallmouth bass from this area that have not been prepared in this manner, Stifel says.

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Because PCB levels found in the smallmouth bass are of greater concern than those for mercury, this advisory is for PCB contamination only. This advisory is for smallmouth bass only; migratory fish such as salmon that spend only a limited portion of their lives in the Columbia River are not included in this advisory.

“Oregon produces an abundance of healthy foods that include a great variety of nutritious fish from our lakes and rivers,” Stifel adds. “Fish offer many beneficial health effects. We encourage consumers to eat two meals a week of different species of fish from a variety of sources, especially fish such as salmon that are high in omega-3 fatty acids.”

This advisory updates information that DHS issued in March 2008 advising consumers to avoid eating smallmouth bass caught near Bonneville Dam.