


OREGON DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
DHS *News Bureau*

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**Elevated levels of mercury in sport-caught fish from
Cooper Creek Reservoir, Douglas County**

The public is being advised of elevated levels of mercury in the meat of fish caught from Cooper Creek Reservoir located east of Sutherlin in Douglas County. The advisory recommends specific limitations for persons who eat fish from the reservoir. The advisory is issued by the Health Division of the Oregon Department of Human Services in cooperation with the Oregon Departments of Environmental Quality and Fish and Wildlife and the Douglas County Health Department.

The advisory is based on mercury analysis of fish samples collected from the reservoir and analyzed by the Department of Environmental Quality's laboratory. Mercury levels in the fish are sufficient to pose health concerns for persons who eat them frequently or on a regular basis, according to Ken Kauffman, environmental health specialist at the Health Division. Children, pregnant and nursing women, and women of child-bearing age are especially susceptible to the effects of mercury. The advisory aims to prevent brain and nerve injury to growing fetuses, infants and small children; and to protect adults from injury to nervous systems, livers and kidneys.

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The average level of mercury found in the fish from Cooper Creek Reservoir is 0.63 parts per million (ppm), says Kauffman. Some individual fish were found to contain mercury levels as high as 1.12 ppm. The Health Division generally issues advisories when the average mercury level of fish in a particular body of water exceeds 0.35 ppm.

The guidance is calculated to protect consumers from any known harmful effects due to mercury. The Health Division recommends that persons limit their eating of fish from Cooper Creek Reservoir as follows:

- ✓ Children 6 years of age and younger should not eat more than one 4-ounce fish meal every seven (7) weeks; and
- ✓ Women of child-bearing age, including pregnant and breast-feeding women should not eat more than one 8-ounce meal per month; and
- ✓ Children older than 6 years of age, women past the age of child-bearing and other healthy adults may safely eat as much as one 8-ounce meal per week.

The mercury in the fish is believed to be from natural mercury in rocks and soil of the area and in the watershed above the reservoir. Mercury leaches and erodes slowly from soil and rocks, and accumulates in sediments of water bodies. Once mercury enters the lower food chain it accumulates in fish and other resident organisms. Mercury levels are not expected to diminish or disappear in the foreseeable future. If further testing shows significant changes in mercury levels, the advisory will be amended as needed.

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The mercury level in the water of the reservoir is not great enough to pose hazards for activities or uses other than the eating of fish or other creatures living in the reservoir. There is no reason to believe that wells in the area are unsafe, but persons who are concerned about their drinking water can have well water tested by a commercial laboratory.

The city of Sutherlin uses water from this reservoir for drinking water. Current and historical water testing has not identified mercury as a water contaminant. Mercury is generally confined to sediments and poses a problem only through food-chain accumulation; so it is not expected to have any drinking water significance.

Anglers are encouraged to practice catch-and-release fishing in this reservoir, especially with larger specimens of any kind of fish, because mercury tends to be found at higher levels in older, larger fish. Because mercury is bound within muscle tissue, it cannot be removed or significantly reduced by cleaning methods, by washing, cooking, brining, smoking or any other known processing technique.

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