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Mercury-laced fish reality for anglers

By **DARREN MARCY**

FARMINGTON, N.M. (AP) -- The angler, on one of those rare days when the fish are biting on nearly every cast, has no trouble catching her limit in just a short time. A big family gathering is on tap with plenty of fresh fish on the menu.



The AP

But that fresh catch may have a dangerous secret.

Mercury contamination of fish is a fact in many states across the country, especially the Southwest. In the Four Corners area, with three rivers and some half dozen fishable lakes nearby, anglers need to know the facts before they break out the tartar sauce.

Darrell Bellows fishes in the San Juan River's quality waters near the community of Navajo Dam, N.M. Bellows says he has heard about the mercury contamination in the river, but doesn't worry about it because he rarely eats his catch.

Three segments of the San Juan River downstream of the Hammond Ditch diversion in New Mexico, as well as Farmington Lake and Navajo Reservoir all have warnings about eating the fish caught from these waters.

Those bodies of water are among the 26 lakes and five river segments in the state that have restrictions to warn people about mercury-contaminated fish.

At greatest risk of health problems caused by mercury are children and pregnant women.

At risk is healthy neurological development -- and while adults are near fully developed -- growing children and women carrying babies are at high risk from mercury poisoning.

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Other dangers include kidney damage, learning deficits and lowered IQ. Some doctors are studying the potential link between mercury contamination and a generation of children being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and children with similar symptoms.

How much mercury it takes to create a health risk is being debated. Public Interest Research Group, a national watchdog group, said governments in general aren't doing enough to educate people of the dangers.

Recently, PIRG released a national study, entitled "Fishing for Trouble," which surveys mercury contamination in America's waterways.

The study is critical of state governments' efforts to monitor mercury in fish as well as efforts to convey those findings to the anglers and others who are eating the fish.

New Mexico is among the dozen states that have "none or very limited monitoring," the PIRG report says.

The watchdog group praises New Mexico's efforts at issuing advisories, but tempers the praise with criticism of the state's lack of consistent monitoring.

When fish consumption guidelines were requested from the state Environment Department, the list sent carried a date of March 18, 1993, with most of the advisories having been issued in 1991.

Nathan Wade, a spokesman for the Environment Department, said the concern over mercury is nothing new and more testing doesn't necessarily mean better information.

In September 1998, the Environment Department produced an article by Scott Hopkins, an environmental specialist. Hopkins wrote that the first fish-consumption advisory was issued in the late 1970s at Elephant Butte Reservoir. In 1995 and 1996, the Surface Water Quality Bureau screened 2,000 miles of waterways, sampling more than 200 stations.

"The data from that study show that, with some notable exceptions, mercury levels in our rivers and streams are very low," Hopkins wrote. "No water sample drawn from any major waterway in New Mexico has been found to contain mercury at a level that could pose any degree of direct risk to humans or wildlife."

The problem is that one of those "notable exceptions" is a coal seam in the Four Corners area. The prime source of mercury contamination is from the burning of coal and oil, which emits mercury into the air and then comes down and accumulates in bodies of water.

Wade said that mercury isn't a New Mexico problem, but a problem across the country.

New Mexico's location, however, doesn't help. The state is directly downwind from California and Arizona, two states with large electric generating capacities.

Also, two large electric generating stations -- both burning coal from that Four Corners-area coal seam -- are upwind of most of New Mexico's San Juan County.

Still, the state Environment Department contends mercury levels in New Mexico's waters aren't too high.

PIRG agrees and said New Mexico has warning level thresholds on par with Environmental Protection Agency guidelines. The problem, according to the watchdog group, is that the guidelines are confusing.

PIRG spokesman Jason Silkey said the bad part is New Mexico is close to doing a very a good job.

"New Mexico has a policy of issuing advisories at relatively low levels of mercury contamination and could be issuing adequate warnings," Silkey said. "But if the state is not routinely testing for mercury in our lakes and rivers, the warning system is irrelevant."

Worse, if you cross a state line, the advisories may mean completely different things.

And in Arizona and Utah, no advisory is issued at all until 1 part per million of mercury is detected and there is no difference for the sensitive populations as compared to the general public. That's four times as high as when New Mexico issues its first warning and the same level as when New Mexico officials encourage people to avoid eating the fish.

PIRG says few of these concerns would matter if the federal government would do a better job at closing loopholes in environmental laws controlling the amount of mercury emitted from power plants and waste incinerators.

According to PIRG, citing EPA estimates, some 1,300 coal and oil-fired power plants emit some 50 tons of mercury per year. The group said it takes only a fraction of a teaspoon per year to contaminate an entire lake to the point of where the fish are unsafe to eat.

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