

Lake Berryessa's mercury levels a concern

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Mercury accumulation in fish from Lake Berryessa and a number of contaminants in fish from the Delta are a continuing problem according to findings released Thursday from California's largest ever survey of contaminants in sport fish.

The State Water Resources Control Board's Surface Water Ambient Monitoring Program (SWAMP) conducted the survey of fish in lakes and reservoirs up and down the state, noting that mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are the two greatest concerns in most waterways.

In Solano County, Berryessa's mercury levels and the mercury, PCBs, dieldrin, DDT, chlordane and dioxin in the Delta are of concern, the survey noted.

This report marks the end of a two-year survey and presents new data on 122 lakes sampled in 2008, adding to the database covering 150 lakes sampled in 2007 and reported last year. The survey focuses on sport fish because they provide information on human exposure and also represent the top of the aquatic food chain, officials said.

Mercury accumulation in fish is a persistent problem throughout much of the state, the survey found. Twenty-one percent of the lakes surveyed had at least one fish species with an average mercury level that exceeded the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) threshold for considering a recommendation of no consumption for women of childbearing age and children. Methylmercury can affect the developing nervous system in children and adolescents, potentially leading to learning disabilities. Mercury contamination of California water bodies is largely a legacy of historic mercury and gold mining, but can also reach lakes from regional and global emissions to the atmosphere. However, the degree of mercury contamination in the state's lakes is comparable to the average condition observed across the U.S. in a recent national lakes survey.

PCBs were second to methylmercury as a potential health concern to consumers of fish caught from California lakes. However, only 1 percent of the lakes sampled had a species with an average concentration that exceeded thresholds. PCBs may cause cancer, damage the liver, digestive tract and nerves; and affect development, reproduction, and the immune system, officials noted.

The Lakes Survey focused on nearly 300 of the most popular fishing lakes in the state. Random sampling of an additional 50 of California's other 9,000 lakes was included to provide the basis for a statistical statewide assessment. This initial screening study was the first step in an effort to identify and quantify contaminants in California's lakes to provide a detailed evaluation of human and wildlife exposure.

The public can access results for individual fishing locations included in the Lakes Survey through the California Water Quality Monitoring Council's "My Water Quality" Web portal at: www.waterboards.ca.gov/mywaterquality/.

Information on sport fish contamination can be accessed by clicking on "Is It Safe to Eat Fish and Shellfish from Our Waters?"