

Tuesday,  
January 31, 1995



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Austin American-Statesman

## Fish in Caddo Lake contaminated with mercury, health officials warn

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Caddo Lake, the only large natural lake in Texas, is a place of haunting beauty, with shimmering waters and stately bald cypress trees. The East Texas wetland is recognized internationally for its rich wildlife.

On Monday, state health authorities added a more dubious distinction: Some of the fish in Caddo Lake are unsafe to eat because of mercury contamination.

An advisory issued by the Health Department warns against eating largemouth bass more than 18 inches long or freshwater drum of any size. The department plans to sample other species as well.

"Subsequent advisories may be necessary," said Dr. David R. Smith, health commissioner.

Tests for mercury in fish in several other East Texas waterways were inconclusive, and additional investigation is planned.

Although fish-consumption advisories have been issued for various waterways around the state, the Caddo Lake advisory is significant for several reasons.

No other waterway in Texas is the subject of an advisory for mercury contamination, except for Lavaca Bay, which was tainted by a spill in the 1970s, said Linda Fernandez, a spokeswoman for the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission.

In addition, many people who live around Caddo Lake regularly eat the fish. Mercury is a toxic heavy metal. Regular, long-term consumption can cause loss of coordination, visual and hearing impairments and skin tingling. Young children and fetuses may experience serious damage to the central nervous system from levels deemed safe for adults.

The Health Department advisory included a special warning for children under the age of 6 and women of childbearing age. Smith said they should limit consumption of largemouth bass under 14 inches to one meal a month. Fishing regulations prohibit taking largemouth bass between 14 and 18 inches long.

The contamination shows a need for greater scrutiny of the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant, which burns toxic waste near the lake, said Amy Johnson,

a lawyer representing Caddo-area environmentalists.

State officials said mercury contamination of fish appears to be a widespread problem in the Southeast. No single source has been implicated, said Fernandez. Rather, generalized fallout coupled with water conditions seems to account for the phenomenon.

Texas health and environmental officials began testing for mercury after Arkansas and Louisiana reported elevated levels. The advisory should serve as a wake-up call, said Murray Lloyd, chairman of the Kisatchie Group of the Sierra Club in Shreveport, La. Caddo is on the border of Louisiana and Texas.

Ironically, a proposal by the Texas conservation commission to designate Caddo and four other water bodies "outstanding natural resource waters" was dropped last summer when it became an issue in the race for governor.

Caddo was designated a wetland of international importance in 1993 under a multinational ecological agreement. It was only the 13th spot in the United States to receive the distinction.