

# Mercury warning issued on some Caddo Lake fish

Continued from Page 1A.

panic," he said. "However, from a public health viewpoint, the prudent thing to do would be to just quit eating them."

Texas health officials checked fish from a half-dozen East Texas waters for several forms of contamination, including mercury. Mercury contamination has been reported from environmentally similar locations in Arkansas, Louisiana and other Southern states, as well as several in the northern Midwest.

At least 32 states have some sort of mercury-related health warning or fish consumption advisory in effect, according to state and federal officials.

"It's really a national problem, but especially in the Southeast," said Smiley Nava, a contaminants biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department who helped with the Texas study.

Exposure to significant amounts of mercury can cause nervous system damage in humans. It also has been linked to birth defects and can cause death in high doses.

Average mercury concentrations in Caddo Lake's largemouth bass and freshwater drum were above the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's warning level of 1 part per million, Mr. Wiles said. Many health specialists say the FDA level should be lowered to trigger warnings sooner.

The Texas Health Department said no one should eat largemouth bass over 18 inches in length, or

freshwater drum of any size, from Caddo Lake. Larger fish have higher mercury concentrations, officials said.

Children younger than 6 or women of child-bearing age should take extra precautions, officials said. They can eat smaller specimens of largemouth bass, 14 inches or smaller, but not more than once a month.

Mercury can enter the environment in numerous ways, none of which has been positively linked to the Caddo Lake problem.

Industrial sources include emissions from smelters, mines, municipal incinerators and coal-burning power plants, where mercury in the coal escapes conventional pollution control methods.

Mercury also enters the environment when batteries, thermometers, other instruments and fluorescent tubes are disposed.

Nature and industrial pollution also can team up to cause a mercury problem. When inorganic forms of mercury have been deposited by pollution, bacteria can produce methyl mercury, a serious type of organic mercury contamination.

Mercury is long-lasting in the environment and becomes more concentrated as it moves up the food chain. With each successive link in the chain — small fish being eaten by bigger ones, which in turn are eaten by even bigger ones — the mercury dose increases. A person who eats a mercury-laden fish might get the biggest dose of all,

health officials said.

Crews from the Parks and Wildlife Department collected the fish samples in September. They retrieved largemouth bass and freshwater drum from Caddo Lake in that round of sampling. Officials plan to do more sampling so they can test more fish species, Mr. Wiles said.

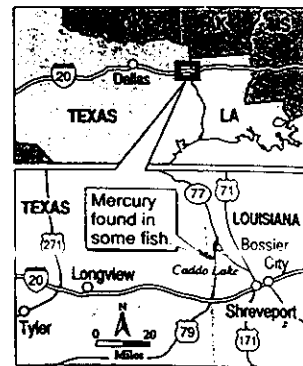
Tests were inconclusive on fish from Steinhagen Reservoir, Sam Rayburn Reservoir, Toledo Bend Reservoir, Taylor Bayou and Lake O' the Pines. More sampling is planned in those waters, officials said.

Mr. Nava of the Parks and Wildlife Department said too few samples have been taken to reach any sweeping conclusions but that the findings justify continuing the research.

Although no firm evidence points to any single source for the mercury, an attorney for several environmental groups implicated the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant, a federal facility located at Karnack on the lake's western side. The plant manufactured military explosives for decades and now is burning excess military chemicals in the open air.

Environmentalists are fighting the Army's plans to continue the burning and said the news about mercury levels boosts their case.

"We think that this health advisory gives added reason to look a lot harder at the toxic air emissions from Longhorn," said Amy John-



The Dallas Morning News

## State issues Caddo Lake fish warning

### Mercury levels unsafe in drum, larger bass

By Randy Lee Loftis  
Environmental Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Some fish from Texas' only natural lake are so contaminated with mercury that they are unsafe for people to eat, state health officials said Monday.

The Texas Department of Health advised people to limit their consumption of largemouth bass and avoid freshwater drum from Caddo Lake, a 25,400-acre lake studded with cypress trees that straddles the Texas-Louisiana line.

It is the first time an inland water body in Texas has been slapped with a health warning on mercury, a toxic element that can occur naturally or as a result of pollution. Lavaca Bay on the Texas coast is under a mercury warning because of



Dallas Morning News file photo

State health officials say some fish in northeast Texas' Caddo Lake are unsafe for people to eat.

industrial contamination.

The source of Caddo Lake's mercury problem is unknown. Kirk Wiles, assistant director of the Health Department's seafood safety division, said officials suspect deposits from the atmosphere and local runoff.

"Certainly there's no reason for Please see MERCURY on Page 14A.