

WE CAN warns of high mercury levels in lakes

By GLENN EVANS *Longview News-Journal 4/25/01*

A fish stirred the brown Sabine River water Thursday morning as the local release of a statewide study of mercury hazards in Texas began on the bank.

"The larger the predatory fish, the larger the accumulation of mercury will be in it," environmentalist Terri Hill, director of Working Effectively for Clean Air Now, told a small group below the Texas 42 bridge. "Once it's introduced to the environment, mercury lasts forever."

Hill and WE CAN air coordinator Tammy Campbell pointed to this area's four coal-burning power plants as the chief contributors to mercury invading area lakes and rivers. Those plants are TXU Electric's Monticello plant at Lake Bob Sandlin, TXU's Martin Lake plant at Martin Creek Lake, AEP/Southwestern Electric Power's Welsh plant outside Mount Pleasant and AEP/Southwestern's Pirkey plant outside Marshall.

More than 3,900 of the 9,000 pounds of mercury released each year in Texas comes from those plants, they said.

"Brain Food: What Women Should Know About Mercury Contamination of Fish," concludes that there are inadequate state and federal warnings about potential health risks from mercury in fish. "Brain Food" was written by the Public Interest Research Group and the Environmental Working Group using seven federal databases as sources.

Both of the groups describe themselves on their Web sites as independent research organizations.

Spokesmen for TXU Electric and AEP/Southwestern agreed that scientific research is needed as their industry cooperates with the Environmental Protection Agency's call for lower mercury emissions. EPA announced Dec. 14 that it intends to regulate mercury emissions from utility plants, AEP/Southwestern spokesman Peter Main said.

"Now, going forward, we need to work together to make sure any control strategies and regulation program has a sound scientific foundation," he said. "The organizations that announced their information (Thursday) morning talked about the need for doctors and public officials and policy-makers to have adequate information to protect the public. They also need adequate scientific information to make sound public policy."

"The kind of research they've discussed in some of the (Brain Food) comments is actually under way."

TXU's Rand LaVonn said American power plants account for 1 percent of mercury emissions worldwide. He added that reductions of mercury emissions are planned.

"We have been, and will continue, to work with the EPA and several industry groups on a reliable standard and ways to reduce mercury," LaVonn said, adding that none of the lakes where there are power plants has been the target of a fish advisory.

He said he would let his own children eat as much fish as they want from Lake Bob Sandlin, below the Monticello plant.

MUNE

Mercury," he said. "So it comes from all over, it comes from volcanos, it comes from forest fires, it comes from other countries."

The study notes risks from mercury in popular fish such as tuna steaks, halibut, sea bass and canned tuna even when consumers follow federal recommendations.

The study calls on the federal government to order coal-burning power plants to reduce mercury emissions by 90 percent. That's the reduction called for in the Clean Smokestacks Act now before Congress.

WE CAN, which formed last summer around the issue of air pollution from local smokestacks, adds that there are mercury advisories for species pulled from Northeast Texas lakes. Mercury advisories were issued in 1995 by the Texas Department of Health for Caddo Lake and Big Cypress Creek, which feeds Lake Bob Sandlin, Lake O' the Pines and Caddo Lake. Sampling at Lake O' the Pines in 1999 showed no mercury contamination in fish, the health department reported then.

Mercury reaches fish and seafood populations when microorganisms in the water convert it to methyl mercury. Hill and Campbell told about 10 people at the water's edge. Hill, who is pregnant, said unborn children and those younger than 10 years are most at risk of neurological damage and developmental impairment from mercury.

"I don't think any parent would want to do that to their children," Hill said. "I'm asking (residents) to call their state and federal representatives and tell them that we want regular fish testing. It (an advisory) should be posted. I think our children and grandchildren are worth the effort to do this."

Campbell said fish advisories are inadequate or absent. She said she visited Caddo Lake, Martin Creek Lake and Lake Bob Sandlin last weekend, inquiring about mercury advisories.

"Caddo didn't have anything listed at this time," she said. "I stopped at the ranger station and they didn't have anything to hand out. And at the boat dock, there was no posting."

A woman at Martin Creek Lake was similarly uninformed, she said. An employee at Lake Bob Sandlin gave her a sheet warning against selenium, another heavy metal classified as a pollutant.

"It's just alarming to me there's no testing done ... there or at any of the lakes," Campbell said.

Hill and Campbell said the new study shows that, even following state recommendations, one in four pregnant women are exposed to damaging mercury levels.

"When I was young, I would go out and fish with my dad," Hill said. "It was a big thing, bringing them home and cooking them. But now I can't do that with my children."

The 1995 advisory recommends adults eat no more than two 8-ounce servings of largemouth bass or freshwater drum from waters under mercury advisories. Children should eat no more than two 4-ounce servings.