

EAST TEXAS

INSIDE:

Opinions **2B**
Church **6-8B**

Caddo Lake fishing lures anglers despite mercury warnings

By Jeff Lehr
Cox East Texas

KARNACK — People who fish at Caddo Lake display fairly high awareness of a state health warning of possible mercury contamination from eating largemouth bass and freshwater drum caught there, according to both public health officials and area residents.

But few know what the accompanying consumption guidelines are, and practically no anglers have become discouraged with fishing the lake in northwest Harrison County.

The Texas Department of Health issued an advisory on consumption of the two species for Caddo Lake in January 1995 after a sampling taken by the department's seafood safety division found unacceptable levels of mercury in fish tissue.

The advisory was posted at the lake early this year. Even before the posting, however, a survey of lake anglers conducted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department showed a near

70 percent awareness that an advisory had been issued.

Keith Hutchinson of TDH's health risk assessment and toxicology program said that level of awareness may well have increased since signs were posted.

"Most people know about the advisory or have some recollection of it. Most people know it was about mercury in largemouth bass," Hutchinson said. "But most don't know what the consumption level is."

The advisory warns that adults should eat no more than two 8-ounce servings and children two 4-ounce servings per month of largemouth bass and freshwater drum caught in Caddo Lake or the East Texas waters of Big Cypress Creek and Sam Rayburn, Toledo Bend and B.A. Steinhagen reservoirs.

The survey — conducted from December 1996 through February 1997 — found that 83 percent did not know the safe amount to eat. Just 25 percent of the anglers surveyed said

they were eating less fish as a consequence of the advisory. About 59 percent said they were not eating less. The others said they never eat fish.

George Williamson, president of the Greater Caddo Lake Association, said the advisory has had little to no impact on the popularity of Caddo Lake with anglers because big bass and drum are not particularly good eating fish and most bass fishermen release what they catch anyway.

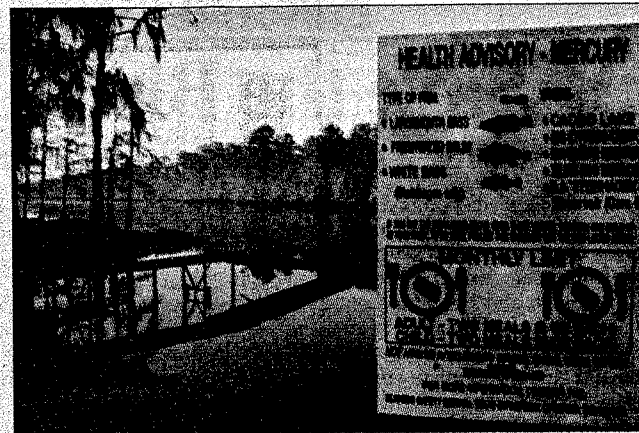
Gary Kempf, who operates Crip's Camp at Uncertain on the southwest shore of the lake, said he's detected little concern even among those who regularly eat fish from the lake.

"I've been eating them all my life. Everybody who lives around here's been eating them," Kempf said.

He is convinced the high mercury levels are not a recent development.

"It's something that's been here for a long time," Kempf said.

See Fish, 3B



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A sign posted near a boat ramp on Caddo Lake warns of the possible danger of eating lake fish contaminated with mercury.

Fish

From 1B

time," Kempf said.

Fish samples taken in August 1994 and April 1995 found an average of 0.83 parts per million of mercury in Caddo largemouth bass and 1.27 parts per million in freshwater drum.

The federal Food and Drug Administration allows up to one part per million in fish before recommending that it should not be eaten. The TDH standard is 0.7 parts per million.

The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to issue new mercury recommendations this week. Anticipation of the EPA report has renewed controversy over how strictly mercury levels should be regulated in Texas waters.

Mike Ordner, survey branch chief of TDH's seafood safety division, said no new samples have

been taken at Caddo Lake since April 1995 because there is no reason to believe levels have dropped to a point at which the advisory could be lifted.

While there has been some speculation that an EPA Superfund cleanup site at the nearby Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant may be linked to the mercury problem, Ordner said there is no known point source at Caddo Lake.

"A major theory is, and nobody really knows for sure, that it is coming from atmospheric deposition," Ordner said.

He said acidic soil, such as that found in East Texas' Piney Woods; the presence of abundant organic material that can enter a lake; and fluctuating lake levels are believed to be conditions favorable to increases in the presence of mercury in fish tissue.