

Texas warns of mercury level in Caddo Lake bass, drum

By REEVES FIELD
The Times

When Texas warned against eating too many bass taken from the upper end of Caddo Lake, those who make their living there worried that anglers would be scared away.

Not so.

"It hasn't discouraged the fishermen," said Rod Hines, who operates Shady Glade Marina in Uncertain, Texas. "Very few fishermen take home bass out of the lake. Most keep catfish, bream and crappie."

Methylmercury begins moving toward the dinner table of Caddo anglers after tiny aquatic plants and animals absorb it from the lake's sediment. They are eaten by small fish, which in turn are eaten by larger fish, which in turn are eaten by fishermen.

Caddo's largemouth bass are at the top of the lake's food chain once they become too large for other fish to consume. As a result, they continue to accumulate mercury in the tissue of various prey, with no apparent ill effects.

But the same cannot be said for the people who consume these fish, especially if they're eaten frequently. Ingesting high amounts of mercury can have severe effects on the brain and nervous system. Most at risk are young children and developing fetuses.

The Environmental Protection Agency considers anything above 1.0 parts per million a potential health risk. The highest level

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found in fish from the Texas side of Caddo Lake was 1.63 ppm.

Testing fish is relatively new on area lakes such as Caddo, so it is not known if mercury levels have been increasing or if the mercury has been there all along. Data collected over several years would help to determine that.

The mercury found in the fish population on upper Caddo Lake — particularly bass, freshwater drum and chain pickerel — cannot be traced to any spill or discharge.

"The biggest contributor is probably atmospheric deposition — perhaps from things like coal-burning power plants," said Emelise Cormier of Louisiana's Department of Environmental Quality. The plants "could be close by or a long way off, since mercury is sometimes found in remote lakes that are many miles from any source."

The Texas Department of Health agrees that a likely source is from emissions released into the atmosphere, perhaps from faraway factories. The department also says mercury can occur naturally.

Whatever the source, the

Mercury's threat

Mercury, when consumed by humans, attacks the brain and nervous system. It is assimilated by predator fish, such as bass, through the food chain. It can also be found in other species. The alert level for mercury contamination in fish is 1.0 part per million. Here's a look at highest levels found in fish on the Texas side of Caddo Lake, where a consumption advisory has been issued, and the Louisiana side.

Texas

1.63 ppm

Louisiana

.380 ppm

*An ounce of salt in 62,500 pounds of sugar would register as one part per million.

Source: Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Environment, Times research

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mercury exists, so health officials can only warn people with advisories. Fishermen must decide for themselves whether to follow them. Studies in other states have shown that these health warnings are frequently ignored, Cormier said.

"They found that people are pretty much aware of the advisories, but that they usually don't pay a lot of attention to them," she said. "They may get disturbed or panicky at first and call to find out more details, but they tend to forget about it."