John A. Kitzhaber, MD, Governor

Oregon Health Authority

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News release

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Limit consumption of some fish species near Bonneville Dam, middle Columbia River

Salmon, steelhead, American shad not affected by advisories extending to McNary Dam

Fish are an important part of a healthy diet, especially migratory fish like salmon. However, Oregon and Washington health officials are issuing fish consumption advisories for certain species from two sections of the Columbia River due to elevated levels of mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) found in fish tissue.

Together, the two advisories, jointly issued today by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) and the Washington Department of Health (WA Health), extend from Bonneville Dam 150 miles upstream to McNary Dam.

Public health officials do not know how long the advisories will last.

The reason for the advisories is that mercury and PCBs can build up in resident fish (that live in one place their entire life) such as bass, bluegill, yellow perch, crappie, walleye, carp, catfish, suckers and sturgeon that stay in the area and are exposed over their lifecycles. People who eat too much contaminated fish can suffer negative health effects over time such as damage to organs, the nervous system and reproductive system.

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The advisories do not affect migratory (traveling) fish species such as salmon, steelhead, American shad and lamprey, which should remain part of a healthy diet.

The advisories are as follows:

- Bonneville Dam – OHA and WA Health recommend no consumption of any resident fish species taken from Bonneville Dam to Ruckel Creek, one mile upstream from Bonneville Dam.
- Middle Columbia River – OHA and WA Health recommend eating no more than one meal per week – four meals per month – of any resident fish species taken from the river between Ruckel Creek and McNary Dam, a roughly 150-mile stretch of the river.

A meal is about the size and thickness of your hand.

Unborn fetuses, nursing babies and small children are most vulnerable to the health effects of PCBs and mercury, so it is especially important that pregnant and nursing women follow this advice. Fetuses and babies exposed to high levels of mercury and PCBs can suffer life-long learning and behavior problems. The state health agencies recommend all women of childbearing age (18 to 45) follow fish advisories. Anglers also should not give resident fish caught from the middle Columbia River to others unless the recipients are aware of where the fish were caught, and they understand the recommendations in these fish advisories.

Washington already has a statewide fish advisory that warns women of childbearing age to not eat Northern Pikeminnow (which are found in the Columbia River) and advises them to limit largemouth and smallmouth bass consumption (based on harvest location) due to elevated mercury levels.

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By issuing these advisories, health officials hope to increase the public's awareness of fish species they should avoid or limit consumption of, and those they can keep eating. While it is important for people to know about contaminants in fish, it is equally important to keep fish on the table. Health officials from both states continue to encourage people, including pregnant women, to eat a variety of fish as part of a healthy diet. Migratory fish such as salmon and steelhead are an essential source of protein, omega-3 fatty acids and other nutrients, and are low in contaminants.

"Our iconic salmon, steelhead and other migratory fish are fine," says toxicologist David Farrer, Ph.D., of OHA's Public Health Division. "People still need to eat at least two meals of fish per week. We just want people to pay attention to these advisories and continue to eat migratory fish from these stretches of the river."

To learn more online about why fish is good for you and get information about fish consumption advisories in Oregon, visit www.healthoregon.org/fishadv. For information about Washington's fish consumption advisories, visit http://www.doh.wa.gov/fish.

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