File

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Ohio River catfish high in toxic chemical

Don't eat catfish caught near here, water sanitation experts recommend

Catfish caught less than 20 miles east of Cincinnati in the Ohio River contained high concentrations of a man-made chemical that could be dangerous to humans.

Water sanitation experts are recommending that people not eat catfish, saying that catfish tested in the Cincinnati and Louisville areas contain the highest concentrations of the chemical found in six places tested along the Ohio River.

Catfish in the Pittsburgh; Cincinnati; Louisville; Wheeling, W. Va.; and Gallipolis, Ohio, areas contain PCB's (polychlorinated biphenyls), a group of man-made toxic substances, "in excess of the tolerance limit for human consumption of PCBs," a recent study shows.

"Eating catfish from these areas could cause long-range health problems," said Jessica Barron of the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission, the organization that coordinated the September-October Ohio River study and released the results Wednesday.

The commission has sent its findings to state and federal government agencies, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which determines safe PCB consumption standards for humans and could ban commercial fishing for catfish in the Ohio River if it sees fit.

"Given the levels of PCBs we found, I would say there is a very strong possibility of a ban," said Ms. Barron. "We might see evidence of some action within a month. If a ban is forthcoming, I suspect it would be applicable to catfish the entire length of the river."

"Given the levels we found locally," Ms. Barron said, "people should not eat any catfish. I personally recommend that people do not eat any catfish."

Ms. Barron said the FDA tolerance limit for PCBs is five parts per million (ppm). In the catfish tested at the Meldahl lock and dam, the level was found to be 16.6 ppm.

Ms. Barron said excessive human consumption of PCBs could lead to health problems like skin lesions and deterioration of nerve tissues.

"There was an outbreak of PCB contamination in Japan in 1968 and some of those people are still suffering from it," she said. "Studies have indicated that one long-term health effect could be liver cancer."

The reason the chemical is showing up in catfish, Ms. Barron said, is that catfish are bottom-feeders, and the insoluble, synthetic chemical settles to the bottom of the river.

"It settles to the bottom and collects in the sediment there," Ms. Barron said. "The catfish feeds in that sediment."

Ms. Barron pointed out that the researchers also tested the water itself in the places where the fish were caught and found no concentration of PCBs in the water, "which we expected because the material settles to the bottom."

"We don't know for sure how or where the PCBs are getting into the river," she said. "We don't know of any industry that is dumping them."

PCBs have been used to build electrical equipment such as transformers and capacitators.

"It could be that industries have junked old electrical equipment and there could be seepage or gradual runoff into the river," she said. "Something apparently is happening because we made a similar test a year ago and the PCB levels were not this high."

Ms. Barron said Kentucky and West Virginia issue commercial fishing licenses for the Ohio River. She also said officials might recommend that sport fishing for catfish be limited because of the test findings.

Highest levels of PCBs were found in catfish collected at Meldahl Lock and Dam above Cincinnati and at McAlpin Lock and Dam in the Louisville vicinity.

"Because of our findings about the catfish, investigations will be stepped up to check out other fish like bass, sauger and the fresh water drum in the Ohio River," she said.

The Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission, headquartered in Cincinnati, is an interstate agency representing Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

Commission recommends curb on phosphorus detergents

DULUTH, Minn. (UPI) — The Great Lakes Basin Commission has recommended that local governments put a low limit on phosphorus in detergents which would effectively outlaw the soap products.

The [illegible] level recommended by the commission was "0.5 per cent by weight expressed as elemental phosphorus." That is lower than the phosphorus level in most detergent soaps, a spokesman said.

Minnesota has enacted a law which outlaws phosphorus in soaps after Jan. 1.

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