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Fish Biologist Claims Superior Trout Scare Overemphasized

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MARQUETTE — Michigan's latest scare over contaminated lake Superior lake trout is making too much of small sample, fish biologist believes.

Based on the present fish sampling, only a pregnant woman who continually eats fish is running much of a risk of poisoning by the traces of mercury or polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), according to Ann Wright. Wright is a fish biologist with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources specializing in the trout native to Lake Superior and the planted nonindigenous varieties like king salmon and coho.

Wright, head of the Great Lakes Fisheries unit of the DNR, is in charge of netting samples of Superior fish populations in study as to habits, breeding, movement and the like. He netted fish are also used by Water Resources Commission staff for study of trace elements. He conducted a study of six lake trout off Black River Harbor in the summer of 1974. The 74 study was made to determine stocks of the scowet (fatly lake trout) and see if the population would support commercial netting.

The latest scare came from fish netted off Isle Royale. Few of the normal Mackinac (lean lake trout) show any of the ranges of high PCBs and mercury counts measured

in the Siscowet and those that do are in fish 27 inches or bigger. Most counts are far below the safety level of mercury and PCBs, Wright said.

Most of the problem fish are the big Siscowets and a few very big Mackinacs and these fish are rarely taken by the average fisherman.

The DNR, he said, is not marketing its experimental fatly lake trout as a safety precaution. And the department also advises, again as a precaution, that persons not eat more than one meal a week of Lake Superior lakera. The problem in this lake largely lies with the Siscowet and the very big Mackinacs.

When the Isle Royale fish were studied, toxicologists found DDT and well as PCBs and mercury. They said levels exceeded the 9.5 parts per million safety level of DDT and PCBs and over the five ppm safe level of mercury. Wright said a few fish showed 12 to 14 ppm of PCBs but again, these were big Siscowet and a few big Mackinacs. He said most Lake Superior trout are far below the five ppm measure for mercury and few ran more than one ppm of the level of the fire retardant chemical.

He said realistically, the only problems would be with

pregnant women who continually eat fish. The sample is part of the problem.

Wright said it is extremely expensive to net samples and when his department did the sampling off Isle Royale it was mostly interested in Siscowet and very few Mackinacs were accidentally caught. Those were very large lean lakera in the 27 inches and better category.

This leads to a skewed sample since the few very big lean lakera are only a very small part of the lean lake trout population in Superior. The sample probably is not statistically representative of the Lake Superior lean lake trout population, Wright agreed in an interview.

The small lean lakera are not a problem, he said. When the DNR made an assessment of Siscowet off Black River harbor two years ago, no lean trout were taken in the sample, Wright said.

Persons catching Siscowet can prepare them for eating by cutting off the belly fat and the fat along the midline and the back and will probably bring the mercury and PCBs level below the tolerances recommended by the state, Wright advised.

It is probably good advice on all large trout taken from Superior.