

Fishy findings

Mercury testing yields advisories

Tribune Editorial

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Utah anglers have three more reasons to practice catch-and-release fishing -- the largemouth bass in Red Fleet Reservoir, the bluegill in Steinaker Reservoir and the wiper in Newcastle Reservoir. Add those species in those bodies of water to the list of state-issued fish consumption advisories, which now number 21 and span the state. Mercury, which can cause neurological damage in humans, is to blame.

A byproduct of hard-rock mining and coal-fired power plant emissions, inorganic mercury compounds are converted to a toxic organic form -- methylmercury -- by bacteria in lake and stream sediments, or internally after direct ingestion by fish. The substance, through a process known as bioaccumulation, builds up in the flesh of fish-eating species. And humans who engage in piscatorial pursuits top the food chain.

Mercury testing began in earnest in the state in 2005, after scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey discovered high methylmercury levels in the deep brine layer of the Great Salt Lake. And fears that the problem could extend throughout the state appear to be well-founded.

Unfortunately, the advisory list is far from complete. Using line-item appropriations in the FY 2008 (\$66,500) and FY2009 (\$100,000) budgets, the state has tested roughly one-fourth of Utah's approximately 1,000 bodies of water. But state budget cuts have largely idled the program, which now relies on federal labs to test a reduced number of fish.

In the most recent round of tests, some new and disturbing wrinkles were revealed. The wipers, a striped bass/white bass hybrid, have mercury concentrations so high that they should not be eaten at all, a first for Utah. (The other advisories limit consumption to two 8-ounce servings per month for most adults, and a ban for children and pregnant women.) And, for the first time a primarily non-predatory fish, the bluegill from Steinaker in the Uinta Basin, made the list.

The situation begs for more testing, and retesting. Checking fish from all state waters on a five-year cycle would be ideal, and air and rainfall monitoring stations strategically placed throughout the state could help identify the source of our problems.

Until that happens, a prudent person would be careful about consuming large amounts of predatory fish from untested Utah waters. Check the status of your favorite fishing hole at www.fishadvisories.utah.gov.

And a prudent state government would quickly restore the nominal sum needed to conduct a comprehensive and ongoing testing program.