CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

News Release

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Contacts: Roy Stearns
(916) 799-1036

Jacqueline Ball
(916) 988-0205

Water sports, beach play OK

Draft Advisory Issued: Mercury Found In Fish at Lake Natoma

SACRAMENTO – Draft health advisory signs have been placed around Lake Natoma cautioning visitors about elevated levels of mercury that have been found in fish in the lake, California State Park officials announced today.

Lake Natoma has 14 miles of shoreline and is downstream from Folsom Lake. It is part of the 18,000-acre Folsom Lake State Park located at the base of the Sierra-Nevada foothills, about 25 miles east of Sacramento.

Health officials emphasized that the finding does not constitute a health hazard for visitors who engage in water contact sports that are popular at the lake and which include beach play, swimming and boating and other aquatic sports. Officials also said water from Lake Natoma that is provided by public water systems is safe for drinking and household uses.

However, health officials cautioned humans who eat fish from Lake Natoma to limit their consumption of these fish. The caution is part of a draft report issued by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) of the California Environmental Protection Agency. The information in the report is based on research data obtained by the U. S. Geological Service and University of California, Davis scientists.

"The presence of mercury in the food chain is a legacy from the Gold Rush era when mercury (quicksilver) was used to recover gold at both placer and hardrock mines," said Jacqueline Ball, District Superintendent of the Gold Fields District where Lake Natoma is located.

"General advisories recommending limited fish consumption throughout the west slopes of the Sierras already exist," she said. This recent information from USGS and UC Davis researchers has provided specific information regarding the different species of fish in Lake Natoma, and we encourage our visitors to heed these advisories."

Ball said, “The good news is that researchers assure us that we can swim and boat in the lake with no concerns. We want to encourage visitors who have enjoyed this park for generations and first-time visitors alike to come and enjoy all that Lake Natoma has to offer.”

According to the report, mercury levels were measured in the following fish: black bullhead, bluegill, brown bullhead, channel catfish, green sunfish, largemouth bass, rainbow trout, redear sunfish, Sacramento pikeminnow, Sacramento sucker, spotted bass, striped bass, and white catfish. Rainbow trout, blue gill and sunfish had the lowest mercury levels.

OEHHA said, “The water in Lake Natoma is safe for boating, floating, and swimming. Water from these sources that is provided by public water systems is safe for drinking and household uses. Mercury does not accumulate in water as it does in fish. Mercury drops down to the sediment where it can be transformed by bacteria to the methylmercury form that enters the food web and builds up in fish. Very little mercury is present in water.”

An OEHHA advisory noted, “Bacteria convert this inorganic form of mercury into a more toxic, organic form known as methylmercury, which fish take in from their diet. Methylmercury can accumulate in fish to concentrations many thousands of times greater than mercury levels in the surrounding water. Because methylmercury accumulates in fish slowly over time, larger fish of a species usually have higher concentration of methylmercury than smaller fish from the same water body. Predatory fish, such as bass, generally contain more methylmercury than non-predatory fish, such as trout.

“Developing fetus and children are especially sensitive to methylmercury. Pregnant women and nursing mothers can pass on methylmercury to their fetuses or infants through the placenta and through breast milk. Excessive exposure to methylmercury can affect the nervous system in children, leading to subtle decreases in learning ability, language skills, attention, and memory. These effects may occur through adolescence as the nervous system continues to develop. For this reason, a more conservative set of guidelines applies to women of childbearing years and children up to and including age 17,” OEHHA said.

According to OEHHA, “In adults, the most subtle symptoms of methylmercury toxicity are numbness and tingling sensations in the hands and feet or around the mouth. Other symptoms at higher levels of exposure could include loss of coordination and vision problems.

“The levels of methylmercury found in fish from these lakes and rivers should not result in the health effects described above if the proposed guidelines are followed. The extent of health effects depends on the amount of methylmercury that people ingest from the fish that they eat and is also related to a person’s body weight,” according to OEHHA.

Different species of fish have different advisory levels for the amount of fish that are recommended for monthly consumption. State Parks has posted pictures of these fish along with the various consumption amounts at all three driving access points to Lake Natoma: Nimbus Flats, Negro Bar and Willow Creek.

No specific mercury studies have occurred at adjacent Folsom Lake. OEHHA recommends that "general advice on how to limit exposure to chemical contaminants in sport fish as well as a fact sheet on methylmercury in sport fish" is available on the internet under the California Sport Fish Consumption Advisories (http://www.oehha.ca.gov/fish). FDA advice regarding fish consumption can be found at http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/admehg.html.

MEDIA NOTE:

- **Please contact California EPA at (916) 324-0955 for questions related to scientific issues included in the report, or by visiting the OEHAA web site at www.oehha.ca.gov**

- **State Park representatives will be at Nimbus Flats at Lake Natoma between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Thursday (April 29) as managers of the land and its facilities. The park can be reached by traveling east on Highway 50 to the Hazel exit, north across the freeway and the first right turn into the State Park. Follow signs to Nimbus Flats.**

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