

Testimony
California Department of Public Health

March 4, 2008

Assembly Water, Parks & Wildlife Committee
Assembly Natural Resources Committee
Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee

Thank you for allowing the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) the opportunity to provide written testimony on land and water contamination issues related to mercury in fish.

As many of you know, continuing runoff from abandoned gold mines in California is a major source of mercury contamination in waterbodies throughout the northern half of the state. In the aquatic environment, mercury is converted to methylmercury, a toxic chemical that can accumulate to high levels in fish. Exposure to mercury from eating fish is of greatest concern for women of childbearing age because mercury is most harmful to the developing fetus. Some studies have shown very subtle effects on neurodevelopment (e.g., in tests of memory, coordination, language skills) in children whose mothers were exposed to high amounts of mercury in fish.

The mercury-related health concern for any individual depends on the amount of methylmercury he or she consumes. Exposure via the diet is influenced by many factors. Mercury levels in fish caught in California waters vary considerably by location, and fish that are high in the food chain accumulate the greatest levels of mercury. Exposure also obviously depends on how much fish a person eats. In addition, Californians are exposed to mercury from fish that are bought in stores and restaurants, some of which also have elevated levels of mercury.

While we certainly would like to limit human exposure to mercury, we don't want people to stop eating fish. Fish has many health benefits, including benefits to the developing fetus. To achieve fish-associated health benefits while minimizing mercury exposures, people need to be able to make informed choices about the kinds of fish that are safest to consume.

Fish consumption advisories provide public health guidelines on the types and amounts of fish that are safe to eat at a specific location. These are issued by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA), within the California Environmental Protection Agency. OEHHA has issued numerous fish consumption advisories in many locations because of mercury. In some instances, mercury levels were so high that advisories warned women of childbearing age and children to completely avoid eating certain species of fish. These places include the Feather, American, and Cosumnes Rivers, Lake Pillsbury, and Camp Far West Reservoir. CDPH works closely with OEHHA to inform the public about these advisories. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Food and Drug Administration have also issued a general fish consumption advisory for women of childbearing age and children, recommending limits on all fish including fish bought from stores and restaurants.

CDPH's role has been primarily to conduct outreach and education to raise public awareness around fish contamination issues. The public health message we strive to communicate to fish consumers is that they should follow the advisories, especially women of childbearing and children.

Over the past three years, with funding from Calfed, CDPH has worked closely on fish contamination issues with stakeholders that include local agencies and community groups in the Delta and Central Valley. These stakeholders have helped us to develop and distribute educational materials, many of which are available in multiple languages, and have also helped

us to post multilingual warning signs in the Delta. We have been able to provide some community groups with small grants and have supported them in conducting educational activities targeted to their communities.

CDPH would be happy to follow up on any questions the committee has or provide additional information. Please contact Monica Wagoner or Jennifer Simoes in CDPH's Legislative and Governmental Affairs Office at (916) 440-7502. Thank you.