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Environmental News

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EPA, R.I. Department of Health Issue Warning About Fish and Other Public Health Risks From Woonasquatucket River

PROVIDENCE - In light of new sediment sampling results showing elevated dioxin levels in the Woonasquatucket River, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the R.I. Department of Health (DOH) today reminded the public to be aware of the "catch and release" advisory in place for fish caught in the river. The fish advisory was first imposed in October 1996 after EPA studies found dioxin, mercury and PCBs in eels and sunfish from the Woonasquatucket.

Sediment samples taken from seven locations in the Woonasquatucket all showed the presence of dioxin. Six of the seven results had highly elevated dioxin levels. The samples were collected from behind dams in a five-mile stretch in the river - from the Esmond Dam area in North Providence south to the Valley Street Bridge in Providence.

"Dioxin continues to be a very serious problem in the Woonasquatucket River," said John P. DeVillars, administrator of the EPA's New England Office, which coordinated the latest sampling effort. "The public needs to be reminded that they should avoid wading and swimming in the river and, even more importantly, refrain from eating fish caught in the river. We're working toward the day when such a warning is no longer necessary, but sadly we're not there yet."

The R.I. Department of Health (DOH) recommends against eating fish caught below the Smithfield-Johnston line. "Exposure to fish and sediments from the lower Woonasquatucket River can pose an unacceptable cancer risk to residents," said DOH Director Dr. Patricia Nolan.

Nolan said that based on bacteria and other contamination in the Woonasquatucket, the Health Department recommends no swimming or wading in the lower section of the river.

"Parents should also tell their children to wash after direct contact with the water to prevent illness," Nolan said. "The same advise would apply to boaters who kayak and canoe in the lower Woonasquatucket and downtown Providence."

Signs of bacteria-related illness include nausea and diarrhea. Short-term health risks from dioxin include skin rashes and long-term exposure to dioxin can lead to cancer.

The latest sampling results had dioxin levels ranging from 94 to 8,200 parts per trillion, with the highest level found behind the Lymansville Dam in North Providence. The second highest concentrations - 7,350 parts per trillion - were found behind the Allendale Dam in North Providence. The samples were reviewed by the EPA's Narragansett Laboratory and were verified by a second EPA Laboratory in Kansas City. The results were confirmed in June.

"These dioxin levels are among the highest we've seen in New England for aquatic sediments," said Richard Pruell, a scientist at the EPA's Narragansett Laboratory who analyzed the sediment samples that were collected last fall. "We will be moving quickly in the coming weeks to do additional sampling and investigation work about the scope of the dioxin contamination and where it may be coming from."

EPA will do additional sampling in and along the river in July and August. The sampling will focus on a two-mile stretch of the river between the Lymansville and Esmond Dams, with the primary emphasis being a section between the Esmond Dam just below the Smithfield line and Allendale Dam in North Providence. The program, substantially larger in scope than the effort last fall, will include the collection of soil samples, shoreline samples and sediment samples along the river's edge.

"Much of the sampling will be focused on areas where there are homes and backyards next to the river and where children are most apt to be playing in and along the river," Pruell said. "While there are no entities known to be discharging dioxins at this time, it is hoped the sampling will help us better identify the source of the dioxins."

Based on the new results, the EPA, Health Department and local community groups will be launching a multilingual outreach program to inform residents of the new findings and the potential health risks posed by the river and the fish. The program will provide information to the public about health risks, preventative measures and proper recreational use of the river.

"Dioxin bioaccumulates in the food chain which is why we are so concerned about the consumption of fish or any other wildlife from the river," said Robert Vanderslice, chief of the Health Department's Office of Environmental Health Risk Assessment. "Incidental contact with dioxin-contaminated sediments is much less of a concern, but we still believe it would be prudent for residents to stay out of the river. Kayaking, canoeing and boating, which involve normal contact, is fine as long as one washes their hands afterwords."

Seventeen "Don't Eat The Fish" signs were posted along the river last month by the Providence Plan, a nonprofit group collaborating with EPA-New England on its Urban Rivers Initiative. EPA plans to post an additional 40 duplicate signs in early July. The signs will be in English and Spanish.

Dioxins, a probable human carcinogen, are produced as a byproduct of numerous industrial processes and may be present in pesticide runoff, incinerator emissions or industrial discharges.

Although the presence of dioxin and bacteria pose public health concerns, substantial progress has been made by local environmental groups to improve water quality in the Woonasquatucket River. In addition, the Urban Rivers Team - a partnership including representatives from local environmental groups, EPA-New England and municipal, state and federal entities, is working together to preserve and restore uses of the river for the public. For more information about dioxin and other issues relating to the Woonasquatucket River, call the EPA's Customer Assistance Office at 1-888-372-7341.