

WACCAMAW RIVER FISH SAMPLED

State Health Officials To Discuss High Mercury Levels Found In Bass

BY SUSAN USHER

State and local health officials were to meet Wednesday, July 21, near Old Dock to discuss potentially harmful levels of mercury found in largemouth bass collected from the Waccamaw River in Brunswick and Columbus counties.

State Health Director Dr. Ron Levine was to discuss findings and future actions regarding those findings at Wednesday's meeting, set for 2 p.m. at the Old Dock/Cyprus Creek Fire Department south of Whiteville on N.C. 130.

State concern about the mercury levels doesn't mean that eating an occasional bass caught in the river would be dangerous to someone's health.

"Our main concern is the person we call a subsistence fisherman, someone who is consuming a large quantity of fish, four to five meals per month," said Deborah Crane, spokesman for the N.C. Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources.

She said it is likely an advisory will be issued about eating fish from the river as well as Big Creek and Mearns Millpond, both of which are north of Lake Waccamaw in Columbus County.

Mercury is a naturally-occurring poisonous element that can accumulate over time. In high concentrations the heavy metal can damage fetuses and cause birth defects, kidney damage, nervous system damage and neurological side effects.

The metal tends to accumulate in predator fish—including tuna. Largemouth bass are at the top of the food chain in the river's ecosystem, and are also the most commonly eaten fish harvested from the Waccamaw River.

The department routinely samples waters statewide, a procedure called "ambient monitoring" in which a few fish are pulled from a stretch of water and tested.

High counts in largemouth bass taken from Waccamaw River last spring resulted in a more thorough sampling that continued from May 1992 through April 1993. Mercury levels in bass tissue exceeded the federal warning level of one part per million at six sites from the Bladen County line to the South Carolina line.

Fish were collected at Mearns Millpond, near the mouth of Big Creek, Crusoe Island, New Britton

Bridge, Pireway and Inman Creek, as well as in Lake Waccamaw itself. Crane said the source of the mercury is a "mystery" at this time, but that the state will continue investigating. It's possible the answer will never be found, she said, citing a similar situation in Florida.

A departmental report on the sampling study indicates that the mercury contamination within the drainage basin "may be a regional or natural phenomenon."

Farming and forestry are important industries in the Waccamaw River basin and, said Crane, lead at one time was used in the production of agricultural chemicals and mercury is a byproduct of woods fires. Controlled burning is a management tool in forestry.

Water and sediment collected during the study contained traces of mercury, and other species of fish, lower down on the food chain, also showed non-hazardous levels of mercury. The state tested such species as bluegill sunfish, blackfish, catfish, black crappies, redbreast and carp, among others, and found mercury levels on average within non-threatening mercury levels.

Mercury levels were not at hazardous levels in fish or water taken from the lake.

The greatest concentrations of mercury—ranging up to 3.4 parts per million (ppm) were found in bass taken in Big Creek near where it empties into the lake.

At New Britton Bridge at the Brunswick-Columbus line above Ash, five bass tested showed an average level of 1.39 ppm, while five sampled at Pireway showed 1.48 ppm.

North Carolina has issued health advisories because of high mercury levels in fish only twice before. In 1981 part of High Rock Lake near Lexington was posted; that warning was lifted last spring.

Just two weeks ago, an advisory was issued for three golf course lakes in Moore County recommending that people eat no more than two meals per month of fish taken from

those waters. And children and women of childbearing age were advised to eat no fish caught in the lakes.

Crane said it is possible an advisory could be issued as early as Wednesday for Waccamaw River and Big Creek.



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

Like This, Dad

Paige Marie Laughish, age 10 months, instructs her father, Henry Laughish, in the fine art of sand crawling. The Laughish family of Kings Mountain recently spent a week at Holden Beach.

Southeastern Welcome Center Won't Join Network But Will Get State Funds

The Southeastern Welcome Center on the U.S. 17 bypass of Shallotte won't be joining the state's network of welcome centers—at least not right away—but it will continue to receive state support.

An effort by Rep. E. David Redwine (D-Brunswick) and other legislators to have the state assume operation of the local center and four others statewide stalled in the General Assembly this summer.

Legislators did agree to appropriate money to each of five local or regional centers during 1993-94 and 1994-95. Southeastern will receive \$75,000 a year.

"That was with the understanding we would try next year to get them in the Department of Commerce," said Redwine. "We're trying to build consensus."

Redwine announced two years ago he planned to stop seeking regular allocations for this center and several similar ones statewide, and use the center's high visitation counts to try to get the state to take over their operation.

The current state allocation comes from the N.C. Department of Transportation's personalized license tag sales proceeds. Other funds from that account will go to promote travel and industrial development, promote travel accessibility for the handicapped and to beautify and landscape non-interstate highways.

When Southeastern Welcome Center Inc. was created as a not-for-profit organization, the N.C. Department of Transportation agreed to build the visitors' center and to operate a rest area on the site, with the understanding that the center would receive no state funding. Similar agreements were reached in two other communities. Almost immediately, however, the centers began accepting allocations obtained by their local legislative delegations through the General Assembly, using money from DOT's own tag fund.

Currently the eight welcome centers operated by the state are all located on interstate highways and operate under federal guidelines.

In addition to its state allocation, the locally-operated center receives funds from Brunswick County, the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce and the Cape Fear Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau. Southeastern promotes travel and tourism in coastal North Carolina.

During its first 11 months of operation in 1992, more than 375,000 travelers visited the center.

The center is open to provide information services seven days a week from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with restroom facilities available around the clock. The center is closed Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Clegg Accepts Legal Post In Cumberland County

Former Brunswick County Manager/Attorney David Clegg said Tuesday he has accepted a position in Fayetteville as one of Cumberland County government's three in-house legal advisers.

Clegg will join Cumberland County Attorney G.B. Johnson's staff July 26 in a new position created as part of a major reorganization of the county's administration and expansion of its legal department.

"It's an opportunity for me," Clegg said. "I'll be gaining experience in an administration that serves 250,000 people versus 50,000. I'll also be 37 miles from my parents' driveway in Lee County and I'll have an opportunity to teach at Fayetteville State University or Methodist College."

Although he is unsure exactly what his new duties will include, Clegg said his hiring was part of an effort by Cumberland County to maintain a "full range of in-house legal services."

Clegg resigned his dual Brunswick County posts March 15 amidst pressure from the local Democratic Party. He was replaced by newly hired County Manager Wyman Yelton and Shallotte lawyer Michael Ramos, who has been retained as county attorney.

Democrat commissioners also voted recently to remove Clegg

from his chairmanship of the Cape Fear Water and Sewer Authority, where he served for seven years. He was replaced on that board by former county manager Billy Carter.

Since his resignation, Clegg said he has taken on some contract legal work and continued his involvement in the Miss Brunswick County, Miss North Carolina and other scholarship pageants. He said he has also acted in two episodes of the television series "Matlock," currently filming in Southport and Wilmington.

Clegg said that although he has a house in Fayetteville, he plans to

maintain his permanent residence in Brunswick County.

His starting salary at the new position will be \$42,000.

Burning Ban Off

A ban on open burning in Brunswick and five other southeastern North Carolina counties was lifted Monday morning after weekend rains brought relief to the dry coastal area.

Burning permits are again being issued by forest rangers and permit agents in Brunswick, Bladen, Pender, Columbus, Duplin and New Hanover counties.

The ban was put in effect July 13 by the N.C. Division of Forest Resources because of hot, dry weather, fires burning across the region and lightning associated with dry thunderstorms.

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