

# Fishermen Waiting For More Information On Mercury Contamination Of River Bass

BY SUSAN USHER

Kenneth Babson asks the same questions customers at his neighborhood store ask when they stop to buy gas, pick up a quart of milk or put their boats in the Waccamaw River at the New Britton Bridge landing at the Columbus County line.

"Just about everybody that comes by here asks about it," said Babson, a nearby customer nodding his head in agreement. "People are a lot more concerned about it than the state realizes. We would like some answers. We want to know what is going on."

"It" is the July 27 state health advisory that recommends limiting consumption of largemouth bass caught in the Waccamaw River or Big Creek in Columbus County because of elevated levels of mercury.

Since then the state has launched an investigation that could determine the extent of the contamination, as well as testing five fishermen who were accustomed to eating heavily of bass caught from the river.

While the advisory regards only largemouth bass, most of the fishermen tested for mercury accumulation told Dr. Greg Smith, a state epidemiologist, their fish eating habits have changed.

"Almost all of them told me they had essentially stopped eating freshwater fish, so apparently the advisory is having an impact.

"They said they are still eating fish, but are eating saltwater fish they have bought. They are aware the advisory is for bass, but for some reason they made that personal choice."

However, Smith said he is not advocating that approach; the state's advisory stands as issued.

Fishermen's reluctance to eat any fish at all from the river reflects general suspicions expressed by customers at Babson's general store. Babson said people who talk to him want to hear about additional test results that confirm it is safe to eat other types of fish.

But most of all, he said, they want to know why there's a mercury problem. The river/Big Creek advisory is only the third such notice issued statewide and the first in southeastern North Carolina.

Several agencies are involved in the investigation, but none has answers yet. Results from two different types of testing are expected to begin coming in during October, not before.

"We're anxiously awaiting testing results too," said Jay Sauber of the N.C. Division of Environmental Management (DEM). "We have done an awful lot of fish collecting to date. We have several hundred samples collected from the Lumber and Waccamaw River areas, a lot of different species. They're in the lab

being analyzed."

"That's a lot of samples and this is sophisticated testing. It takes time," said Sauber.

Once the results are in and have been interpreted by the agency's environmental epidemiology staff, the results will be compiled and released to the public.

"This should give us some insight into the geographic extent of the problem," he said, which is one of the first steps in narrowing down potential causes.

"Our whole purpose in this is to let consumers know what is going on. We just don't have the results yet."

Hair and blood samples taken from some Columbus County residents who were in the habit of regularly eating largemouth bass from the Waccamaw River or Big Creek are also in state labs undergoing analysis, along with control specimens that include samples provided by Dr. Greg Smith, a state environmental epidemiologist.

Of the 20 persons scheduled for to participate in the study being conducted in cooperation with the Columbus County Health Department, only five showed up, he said.

"It was a rather disappointing turnout," said Smith. "Any future effort depends on what these results show. If the levels are within the range of normal background level

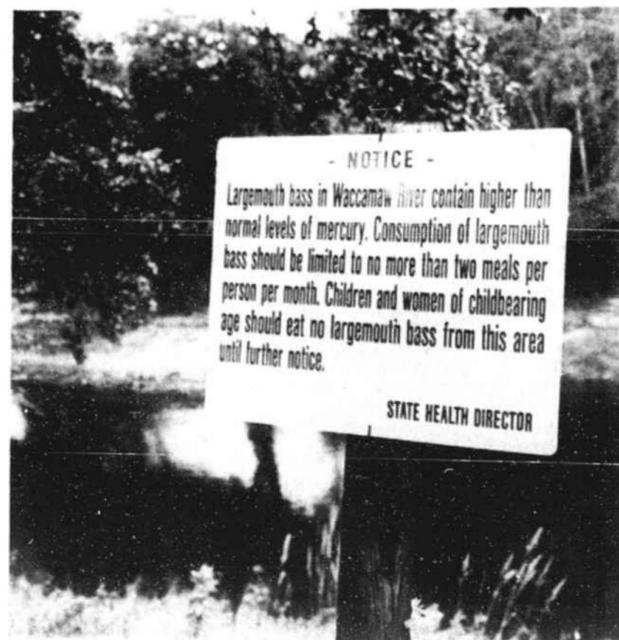
I'm not sure we would do anything else."

At two meetings with state officials, local fishermen have asked about the effects of past longterm consumption of the food and whether other types of fish common in the river such as the predator bowfin (blackfish), catfish and jack, white perch (a member of the bass) family and others such as the popular bream had been tested as well. In some cases a limited number of specimens had been tested, not enough from which to draw any conclusions. Some species simply had not been caught in previous sample collection trips.

According to state health officials, the river is safe for recreational purposes such as swimming, wading and boating, as well as catching and eating other species of fish.

Elevated mercury levels were first noticed in routine fish tissue sampling by the state in May 1992 and confirmed by additional sampling from June 1992 through April 1993. Some of the highest concentrations of mercury were noted in bass taken from waters near the New Britton and Pireway bridge landings.

The largemouth bass is a predator. It eats smaller fish, which means it can accumulate mercury found in smaller amounts in those fish in its



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

**THIS NOTICE warns of higher than normal levels of mercury only in largemouth bass caught in the Waccamaw River, but area fishermen aren't satisfied that it's safe to eat other species found in the river.**

tissue at a rate faster than the mercury leaves its body.

Because of potential side effects, the advisory urges women of childbearing age and children not to con-

sume the largemouth bass at all. Other adults are encouraged to eat no more than two meals (totaling approximately one pound) of largemouth bass in a month's time.

# Local Effort To Benefit Midwestern Flood Victims

A local woman is leading a relief drive to collect supplies for Midwestern flood victims.

"We want to give folks in this area an opportunity to reach out to the thousands of people who lost everything in this summer's floods," said Janet Pope of Grissetown, coordinator of the drive.

The goal is to collect a tractor trailerload of supplies which will be picked up and distributed by Larry Jones International Ministries/Feed the Children, an Oklahoma City-based mission group which has been responding to natural disasters and other worldwide needs for 20 years, Pope said.

The ministry has already delivered

91 truckloads—3 million pounds of food, clothing and other supplies—to the flood victims, she added.

"I saw a television special about it, and I was thrilled that this might be a way to let local people reach out and make a difference."

Goods will be collected at the fellowship hall of Shallotte First Baptist Church every weekday until Sept. 28 from 10-11:30 a.m. and 5-7 p.m. On Saturdays, the site will be staffed from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. "When we have a truckload—enough to fill a space about 40 by 40 by 3 feet—we'll need to sort, box and label the goods to be ready for pick-up."

Among items the flood victims

need are baby food, formula, disposable diapers and all baby products; nonperishable foods and beverages, paper goods, disposable plates, cups and utensils; personal hygiene items, bottled water, clothing, shoes, clean linens, toys and school supplies.

Also needed are volunteers to help staff the collection site and to help prepare donations for shipping.

For more information about how to help, call Janet Pope at 287-3111.

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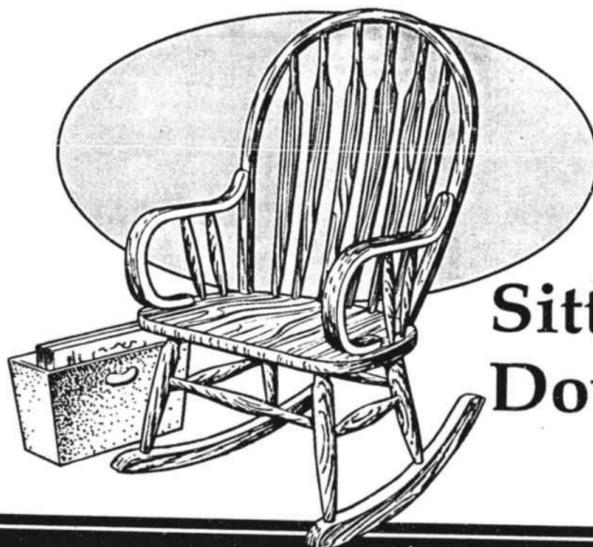
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