



LIZ BROWN-PICKREN

Fishing survey results are in



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By **LIZ BROWN-PICKREN**

Contaminants in recreationally caught fish was the subject of my talk in the Tyrrell County Public Library on June 21, and the information was disheartening.



People don't know enough about the contaminants in the fish they eat.

I interviewed 15 community leaders – elected officials, church leaders, business owners and state employees – and 50 Tyrrell County residents last February. More than half the people I spoke with said they were worried about contaminants in the fish they eat, but most of them said they didn't know about the two consumption advisories for this area.

Those who said they knew about the advisories didn't have accurate information; only two people mentioned catfish, which is one of the two types of fish named in the advisory for western Albemarle Sound. The other is carp, but not too many people eat carp.

The advisory is a result of dioxins in the water, a product of two wood mills upstream. When the advisory was first issued in 1991 all the fish were off limits but with all the efforts to clean up the discharge, the advisory was changed in 2002 to just catfish and carp.

Now the advisory says that nobody should eat more than one meal a month of those two types of fish and the 'sensitive population (women who are pregnant or are likely to get pregnant, nursing mothers, and children under age fifteen) shouldn't eat them at all. Dioxins are suspected of causing cancer."

I don't want to scare people from eating fish, because it can be a cheap source of good protein; I'm hoping to help them eat fish more safely.

The other advisory is for mercury, which causes problems in developing nervous systems, which is why young children and developing babies shouldn't be exposed to it.

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The North Carolina Department of Public Health provides a list of which fish are considered high or low in mercury and advises the 'sensitive population' to avoid eating fish from the 'high in mercury' list but go ahead and eat up to two meals a week of fish from the 'low in mercury' list.

Other individuals should eat no more than one meal a week of fish from the 'high' list but can eat up to four meals per week of fish low in mercury. Black crappie, catfish, and yellow perch are on the 'high in mercury' list and these were mentioned as target species by survey respondents. The whole list is available on line at epi.publichealth.nc.gov/oee/mercury/safefish.html.

The two ways to find the consumption advisories are in the freshwater fishing regulations published by the Wildlife Resources Commission and on line from the Department of Health. If you get a salt water fishing license or buy your license on line you don't get a copy of the WRC booklet, so in the survey I asked about internet use and found that more than half of the respondents don't use it at all. Out of those who do use the internet, more than half have looked up fishing regulations but fewer than a quarter have looked up fish consumption advisories.

I asked people how they think contaminants get in the water. Only one person mentioned industrial pollution, which is the source of the dioxins in Albemarle Sound. The most common answer was farm runoff, but that isn't the source of the fish consumption advisories. Not that the pesticides and sediment from farms doesn't affect the Sound, but that runoff isn't included in the consumption advisories.

I also asked how people learn about contaminants in fish and most answered either enforcement officers or from friends; two people thought they would get current information from bulletin boards near boat ramps but that is not the case.

I asked how important it was to eat fish that they caught themselves or were given as gifts, and fewer than a fourth of respondents said it wasn't at all important. People also said that they used to rely on fishing a lot more but with more complicated regulations and the weeds choking the county ditches, they didn't go fishing as often as in the past.

One concern was that I found people who fish who don't have a fishing license. The regulations changed in 2007 and everybody has to have a license or some kind of waiver to fish or they are subject to a pretty steep fine.

My research was about recreationally caught fish; commercial fishing has a bunch of safeguards before it reaches the counter. I don't want to stop people from enjoying fish, just to know what the risks are.

The final report will be available at the Tyrrell County Public Library and on line at the NC Sea Grant website.

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