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Our state health agency could do more for our health

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We only look like bystanders watching from a distance. We aren't.

Around noon today -- 12:15 p.m., to be precise, the news release says -- it will be Pee Dee, not Upstate, physicians outside the Department of Health and Environmental Control offices in Florence, a few hours' drive from here.

The reason for their assembly: "to request formally that DHEC begin testing human populations in the Pee Dee region for mercury contamination," the release says.

DHEC regularly tests fish for mercury.

**Advertisement** According to its Web site, the department has tested more than 2,000 fish samples throughout the state since its last mercury advisory update in 2006.

Based on those results, consumption advisories (translation: warnings) are in effect for 42 South Carolina rivers, creeks and streams and 20 lakes, the Web site notes.

So how well are those warnings working? People know all about them? Vacationers clear on where to fish and where not to?

Folks without big pocketbooks, who catch fish to eat because that's what they can afford -- those advisories keeping them safe?

Don't ask DHEC. They don't test people for mercury.

Even though the agency's mercury fact sheet says "some forms are more dangerous than others, but all are toxic" and exposure to the neurotoxin, "even small amounts -- may cause serious health problems."

The department actually owns two scanners (\$25,000 each) that can measure the presence of mercury in blood, the Charleston Post & Courier reported in October. One scanner the department's owned for three years.

But, the Post , said, "So far, the agency has tested only one member of the public, a doctor from Hilton Head."

The newspaper financed its own mercury tests, collected 41 samples of hair from people, and sent them off to the Environmental Quality Institute's certified lab at the University of North Carolina-Asheville.

Of the 41 tested, 17 people had higher mercury levels than the Environmental Protection Agency considers safe.

Six had mercury levels that would've fallen within the top 1 percent of recent national studies.

But then, as the Post's story pointed out, "Average mercury levels are so high in fish from some South Carolina rivers that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration could order a national recall if they were sold in stores."

And "Between Conway and Florence, hot spots form a 'Mercury Triangle' where fish are so full of mercury that the state warns against eating a single bite of some species."

If that's how contaminated the fish are there, what about the people?

This is the question the doctors want answered.

They'd like it answered before Santee Cooper starts building a new coal-fired power plant in the area -- because the new plant would emit 138 more pounds of mercury every year.

Three doctors have sent DHEC letters asking for area residents to be tested. So formal requests have been made.

The gathering at noon at the agency's Florence offices is meant to publicly underline the requests.

But really, this is about more than the power plant. It's about DHEC's role in any number of environmental issues in all parts of the state. It's a call for the agency to be more proactive on behalf of the public.

Remember how people who swam near Reedy River Falls were surprised to learn last summer about the water quality?

DHEC knew.

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