

Mercury testing should expand to humans

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ISSUE: Mercury contamination

OUR VIEW: Newspaper series indicates need for broader testing

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control has been warning residents since 1994 of the dangers posed by mercury in fish caught in the state's waters. The time has come for action not before taken by DHEC: testing of humans for mercury contamination.

After testing more than 2,000 fish samples for mercury earlier this year, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control announced consumption advisories because of mercury now are in effect for 42 South Carolina rivers, creeks and streams, and 20 lakes. Certain saltwater species are also affected.

Some mercury occurs naturally, but coal-burning industries, chlorine manufacturers and waste incinerators also contribute to high mercury levels in the air and water.

The mercury issue is especially severe in South Carolina. Some studies indicate the state has one of the worst mercury hot-spot problems in the nation.

Critics of Santee Cooper's proposed coal-fired generating station are using mercury contamination as further reason to call off construction. They also are among those calling on DHEC to go beyond its mercury advisories.

Physicians from the Pee Dee have announced they will gather outside DHEC's Florence offices on Thursday to request formally that the health agency begin testing human populations in the Pee Dee region for mercury contamination.

They cite a recent investigative series in the Charleston Post & Courier that documented alarming and dangerous levels of mercury in South Carolina citizens who eat fish from the state's mercury-contaminated rivers, including the Pee Dee.

The newspaper's tests found that a few frequent fish-eaters had levels so high they rank among the most mercury-tainted people in the nation.

DHEC has stated the agency will not begin testing without a formal request from a physician. Two weeks ago, Florence resident and neurosurgeon Dr. Ken Kammer submitted a request, and since that time two other physicians, Dr. Tim Dancy and Dr. Bernetha George, have submitted supporting letters calling for DHEC to test humans for mercury.

The need for a testing program is not confined to the Pee Dee. Many T&D Region residents also consume fish from waters such as the Edisto and Lake Marion.

And while the fact that mercury has been found should be enough to prompt public compliance with warnings about consumption, there remains the need not only to warn people but be proactive in both monitoring the scope of the problem in humans and finding ways to reduce the mercury contamination.

Visit www.scdhec.gov/fish for a state map with the latest advisories, information and a booklet and other materials that can be downloaded.