

Facing our mercury problem

By BEN GREGG
Guest columnist

Not only do fishermen like to fish, most like to eat what they catch. For many South Carolina families, fish are a staple of their diets. But mercury pollution in South Carolina's rivers and streams is making it dangerous to eat these fish. What gives?

When you consider that a recent US Fish & Wildlife study found that more than 800,000 people in South Carolina fish, it seems decision-makers should be addressing this danger.

On the Little Pee Dee River, the state Department of Health and Environmental Control tells us not to eat the mudfish, flathead catfish, chain pickerel or largemouth bass. On the Lynches River, the state's "authority" on consumer health warns against eating mudfish or channel catfish. State fish advisories warn people against eating any of those five types of fish caught in the Edisto River. Furthermore, the state tells people who fish the Edisto not to eat black crappie, bluegill or redbreast sunfish more than one meal a week.

Along many of South Carolina's waterways — on some 1,747 miles of state rivers and streams — the stories are much the same: Either you shouldn't eat the fish or you shouldn't eat them regularly.

Why? Mercury, one of the most toxic elements on earth.

Thanks to recent scrutiny from concerned citizens and the media, a dirty little secret about state waters is out: Mercury pollution is bad in South Carolina — so bad, in fact, that the black water rivers and streams in the Pee Dee and Lowcountry are a national "hotspot" for high levels of mercury in the environment.

Some mercury pollution is naturally occurring. But scientists say the amount of mercury now being spewed into the air is three times what it was 200 years ago. The main culprit is pollution from manmade sources. At the top of that list are coal-burning power plants, which are responsible for 40 percent of mercury emissions in the United States.

Once toxic mercury gets into the air, it is absorbed in precipitation and then deposited back into rivers and lakes. Microorganisms then convert mercury into methyl mercury, which becomes part of the food chain as the microorganisms are consumed: tiny fish eat tiny organisms; bigger fish eat the tiny fish; then the biggest fish, such as largemouth

bass, eat the bigger fish. Mercury concentrations increase at every step in the chain, until they end up in the biggest fishers of all — me and you!

Studies have linked methyl mercury to low birth weight, small head circumference, severe mental retardation, cerebral palsy, deafness, blindness and seizures. Adults exposed to methyl mercury experience loss of motor coordination, loss of or decreased sensation, impaired speech and hearing and mental disturbances. They are also at higher risk for cardiovascular disease and death.

From its existing dirty coal plants, Santee Cooper already emits about a third of all the mercury pollution in South Carolina. Now this state-owned power company is proposing to build yet another old-style, dirty coal plant right near the confluence of the Lynches, the Little and the Great Pee Dee rivers.

This vulnerable area has been labeled the “Mercury Triangle.” Toxin levels in this region already violate federal law and are some of the highest in the state. People fish these waters for subsistence. Just one pound of methyl mercury is enough to contaminate 500,000 pounds of fish tissue. What impact will this plant have on communities that rely on fishing for subsistence? We don’t know. Neither DHEC nor Santee Cooper has addressed these concerns.

Instead, DHEC has hastily issued a draft air permit allowing Santee Cooper to emit 138 pounds of toxic mercury into the air every year. This plant will be operational for 50 years. What will be the cumulative impact of these mercury emissions over the next 50 years? Nobody knows.

It’s time to remind decision-makers, including state senators, House members and agency officials about a few things. Our 800,000 South Carolina anglers are putting more than \$1 billion annually into the state’s economy, and a considerable part of that money is spent in strapped rural areas. It’s also a good time to remember that our air, our water, our wildlife and our fish are owned by the state’s citizens, not by elected officials, not by Santee Cooper and not by DHEC.

Fishermen want to be able to catch — and eat — largemouth bass, catfish and a host of other species in South Carolina’s waters. But until we stand up and say it’s time to clean up our rivers — including not licensing dirty coal-fired power plants — South Carolina’s anglers will spend more time dreaming about the good ol’ days of fishing than living them.

Mr. Gregg is executive director of the S.C. Wildlife Federation.

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