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Mercury warnings to go up

DHEC to post signs on state's rivers and lakes to alert people about polluted fish

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Signs warning about mercury-polluted fish will be posted on rivers and lakes across South Carolina after years of failure by state officials to erect the placards.

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control plans to post advisories at boat landings or other visible places so people know about the dangers of eating fish tainted with mercury, officials said Thursday.

DHEC began documenting the mercury problem through fish tissue studies in the early 1990s. Since then, it has put warnings on its Web site and written pamphlets as the mercury buildup in fish has spread to 60 waterways and the Atlantic Ocean.

But many people haven't gotten the message because they don't have computers in the field.

That's a problem, agency board members said at their monthly meeting Thursday.

"I want to see signs at these boat ramps," board member Edwin Cooper said. "I think it is irresponsible for us not to do it."

Cooper said he doubts people at "fish fries down on the Edisto River" know much about the harm mercury presents.

Mercury is a toxic metal that can cause brain damage, nervous system disorders and kidney failure. It is particularly toxic to young and unborn children.

The contaminant builds up in some fish species as pollution from power plants and other combustion sources settles into waterways. The Congaree and Wateree rivers near Columbia are among rivers with mercury advisories warning against eating more than

moderate amounts of some fish. On other rivers, the agency warns against eating any fish of certain species.

DHEC Commissioner Earl Hunter questioned whether posting mercury signs is practical because the public may deface or steal signs. But board chairman Bo Aughtry said it's worthwhile.

David Wilson, director of DHEC's water bureau, said he hopes to have signs in place within the next year.

Wilson said he did not know how much the effort would cost or exactly what the signs will say. But the mercury postings will be part of an effort to better inform the public about contamination in state waterways, he said.

Questions about mercury in fish have resurfaced recently. The Santee Cooper power company wants to build a \$1 billion coal plant near Florence that will release more than 130 pounds of mercury annually in an area with already polluted fish.

Santee Cooper released an economic analysis Thursday showing the plant would contribute more than \$900 million to the state's economy in its five year construction period. Aughtry said after Thursday's meeting he planned to discuss testing of humans who may have eaten mercury-polluted fish.

Environmentalists, who oppose the plant, said they're encouraged DHEC will begin posting rivers and lakes warning about mercury pollution in fish.

But the Sierra Club's Bob Guild said he'll still ask the Legislature to approve a bill requiring warning signs — to make sure DHEC does the job. Guild also said the agency needs to post signs warning of bacteria contamination in swimming areas.

Former DHEC official Chester Sansbury, a representative of Republicans for Environmental Protection, said mercury signs are overdue.

"We never did that while I was at DHEC," he said, adding he remembers advisory notices being posted on bulletin boards at some boat ramps. "But I don't think that program was very successful."

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