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EPA, RI Department of Health Recommend Catch and Release Policy for Sections of Woonasquatucket River

PROVIDENCE -- The Environmental Protection Agency and the Rhode Island Department of Health are recommending a "catch and release" policy for fish caught on the Woonasquatucket River based on a recent series of studies that found dioxin, PCBs and mercury in eels and sunfish.

Two separate sets of samples, sunfish from near the Valley Street Park in Providence, and eels from where Route 44 crosses the river in North Providence, were analyzed for heavy metals, pesticides and industrial contaminants. Levels of dioxins, PCBs and mercury were elevated.

"Although water quality has improved enough for fish to return to the Woonasquatucket River, these data show that fish are still not safe to eat," said Dr. Patricia Nolan, director of the Rhode Island Department of Health. "Based on these preliminary data from the EPA, the Rhode Island Department of Health is recommending against eating fish caught in the Woonasquatucket River below the Smithfield Treatment Plant. Dioxin levels in both sunfish and eel pose an unacceptable cancer risk to anyone regularly consuming these fish, and we therefore support a 'catch and release' policy."

PCB and mercury levels were also elevated, potentially posing a health threat to pregnant women.

"While we do not want to discourage people from enjoying this precious urban waterway, we do want to alert them of any possible health effects, however minute, that can result from eating fish," said John P. DeVillars, administrator for the EPA's New England office. "This type of joint operation is what EPA's Urban Initiative is all about -- partnering with community organizations and local, state and federal agencies to bring environmental protection to New England's inner-city population."

Based on the sampling findings, the Rhode Island Department of Health and local community organizations will conduct a public outreach campaign to inform residents of the health threats posed by eating fish from the Woonasquatucket River. Activities planned include the posting of

signs adjacent to popular fishing holes, a series of public service announcements on local radio stations and other related outreach activities. All outreach will be multilingual.
In addition, the EPA will work with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management to begin looking into the sources of contamination entering the river.

PCBs and mercury are the subject of numerous health advisories throughout the country; Maine, Minnesota and New York have advisories about dioxins. Dioxins are created inadvertently during numerous industrial processes, and may be present in pesticide runoff, incinerator emissions or industrial discharges. While all RI waters have the potential to be impacted by any of these sources, EPA chemists believe that atmospheric deposition from incinerators is not the likely source of the dioxin in these samples.

The operation was carried out as part of EPA-New England's Urban Environmental Initiative, which was launched to identify critical problems in the region's towns and cities and develop strategies for revitalizing the environment.

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