

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



Survey of Contaminants in Fish in Southern California (April 8, 2004)

Background:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Superfund Program and the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program (MSRP)* initiated a comprehensive fish sampling effort in Fall 2002 to assess current fish contamination levels in the Southern California coast area. The purpose of this fact sheet is to update you on the status of the fish monitoring effort and explain how the fish survey data will be used.

Some marine fish in the ocean of the Southern California coast are heavily contaminated with DDTs and PCBs, as a result of the DDT- and PCB-contaminated sediment offshore of the Palos Verdes peninsula. This contaminated sediment was a result of historic discharge of industrial wastewater including wastewater from Montrose Chemical Corporation of California Inc.'s DDT manufacturing plant. The State of California has issued fish consumption advisories for locations between Malibu and Newport Beach (California Sport Fish Consumption Advisories, June 2001). However, it has been more than fifteen years since the last large-scale survey of contaminants in fish in this area was conducted.

The collected fish species were Pacific barracuda, chub (Pacific) mackerel, Pacific sardine, yellowtail, opaleye, sargo, kelp (calico) bass, surfperches, rockfishes, California sheephead, barred sandbass, top smelt, halfmoon, California scorpionfish ("sculpin"), white seabass, black croaker, white croaker, yellowfin croaker, jacksmelt, California corbina, California halibut, shovelnose guitarfish and queenfish. These fish were caught at designated locations from Ventura to Dana Point, mostly in the Los Angeles area. Approximately 900 fish samples are currently being analyzed for DDTs, PCBs, dieldrin, chlordane and mercury.

* Montrose Settlements Restoration Program includes the following six natural resource trustee agencies: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, California Department of Fish and Game, California State Lands Commission and California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Why are we doing this survey?

The results of this contaminant in fish study will be used to evaluate and design projects that help protect the public from consuming contaminated fish and to improve the public's ability to fish for wholesome fish. The agencies have been planning/conducting four categories of projects that will make use of the fish sampling data:

- ❑ **Health advisories and commercial fishing bans:** EPA is working with appropriate California state agencies to examine the existing fish consumption advisories for Southern California marine waters and the ban of commercial fishing for white croaker near Palos Verdes.
- ❑ **Cleanup of contaminated sediment:** The vast majority of the DDTs and PCBs causing the fish contamination are in a large deposit of sediments lying on the Palos Verdes Shelf. EPA is studying the contamination and looking at ways to reduce the extent to which DDTs and PCBs are released into the environment.
- ❑ **Restoration of lost fishing opportunities:** The natural resource trustee agencies, through the MSRP, are investigating several potential approaches to increase the availability of wholesome fish to catch along the coast of Southern California, for instance through manipulation of habitat around fishing sites that would increase availability of wholesome fish.
- ❑ **Public information:** EPA is conducting an extensive public education and outreach effort, working with community organizations, regarding the risks of consuming certain contaminated fish. The MSRP is collaborating with community organizations and health agencies to educate the public on how they may take advantage of alternative opportunities to fish for wholesome fish along the coast of Southern California. This would include more effective educational programs, and better public information about the specific nature of the fish contamination problems and wholesome fishing opportunities along the coasts of Los Angeles and Orange Counties.

When will the fish contamination data be available?

First, all fish contamination results from this program will undergo rigorous data quality assessment (data validation). As soon as the data quality assessment has been completed, EPA and the MSRP will provide the entire data set to the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA). OEHHA will use these data (and data from other sources) to update the existing recreational (sport) fish consumption advisories and to review the adequacy of the current white croaker commercial catch ban area, if warranted. We currently estimate that most of these data (not including the last two rounds of the commercial catch ban data) will be provided to OEHHA in May 2004. While the fish contamination data will also be available to the public at that time, the interpretation of the data in terms of any human consumption advisories must await OEHHA analysis and decision-making (see below). EPA and the MSRP encourage the public to play an active role in that process, and we will be working with OEHHA to ensure that the data and their associated interpretation will be provided and explained to the public. However, EPA and the MSRP will not provide specific guidance on how the fish contamination

data might be acted upon until OEHHA has had the opportunity to thoroughly assess the data. Once data interpretation is completed, the information will be presented to the public in several ways, as described below.

Fish Consumption Advisories and Commercial Catch Ban Designation

The State's regulatory process for updating the *fish advisory*:

OEHHA is the agency responsible for evaluating potential public health risks from consumption of angler-caught fish that are contaminated and issuing fish consumption advisories. OEHHA will use the EPA and the MSRP survey data (along with other recent data) to update, as warranted, the existing sport fish consumption advisories for Southern California between Point Dume and Dana Point (California Sport Fish Consumption Advisories, June 2001), including adjoining areas with adequate data. During this evaluation, OEHHA will contact health officials in Los Angeles, Orange and Ventura Counties to discuss health implications of the new data that could warrant a change in advice to protect public health, if new advisories are warranted. OEHHA will prepare a draft report providing and explaining recommendations for new advisories. OEHHA will release the draft report of findings and recommendations for a 30-day public comment period. A public workshop to answer questions and receive public input on the draft report and advisories will be held during the public comment period. OEHHA will consider comments received during this process and develop a final report and advisories. Announcements concerning the draft and final report will be published in the California Regulatory Notice Register and on the OEHHA Web site.

The State's regulatory process for updating *the designation of the commercial catch ban area*:

OEHHA is also responsible for evaluating potential public health risks from chemical contamination of fish caught with commercial fishing license in state waters. The Director of OEHHA may recommend to the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) that state waters be closed for commercial fishing when there is scientific evidence that a species may pose a health risk for human consumption. OEHHA will use white croaker data from USEPA and the MSRP (along with other recent data) to update the existing commercial catch ban area as appropriate for white croaker near the Palos Verdes Shelf. This evaluation will not begin until samples from four seasons have been collected and analyzed. OEHHA will then prepare a draft report explaining recommendations to the Director of CDFG for modifying or retaining the current catch ban area.

OEHHA will release a draft report for the catch ban evaluation including recommendations for modifying or retaining the current catch ban area for a 30-day public comment period and hold a public workshop during the comment period. OEHHA will consider comments received and develop a final report and catch ban recommendations. Announcements concerning the draft and final report will be published in the California Regulatory Notice Register and on the OEHHA Web site.

The current catch ban was put in place by the Fish and Game Commission (Title 14 CCR Sec. 104) and any modifications to the catch ban would most likely be implemented by amending that regulation section, as needed, based on recommendation from the DFG resulting from the determinations of OEHHA. The Fish and Game Commission regulatory process follows the requirements of the Administrative Procedures Act and provides for public notice of proposed actions and public response and comment over at least two monthly meetings of the Commission prior to adoption of regulations.

Evaluation and Selection of a Sediment Cleanup Plan

EPA will use the relevant fish contaminant data in its evaluation of the current and future risks related to the Palos Verdes Shelf Superfund investigation and the potential cleanup action for DDT and PCB contaminated sediment. This information will assist the EPA in developing a proposed cleanup plan. If EPA decides that cleanup is warranted and that there is a feasible and appropriate cleanup option, EPA will release a proposed plan for public review and comment before a cleanup decision is made, in a Record of Decision. EPA expects to complete its investigation by late 2005.

Restoration of Lost Fishing Opportunities Caused by the Contamination

The MSRP is currently preparing a draft Restoration Plan and Environmental Impact Statement/ Report that, among other things, will describe alternative approaches for restoring lost fishing opportunities. The public's use of marine fishing resources have been negatively impacted by the Montrose contaminants, and the MSRP is exploring ways to provide greater opportunity and access to clean/wholesome marine fishing in the region.

The MSRP has received several fish restoration ideas from the general public and from other organizations and experts, and is formulating a draft plan that will be circulated for public review and input. The MSRP currently estimates that the draft Restoration Plan will be released in the Fall of 2004. Further information about the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program and restoration planning activities may be obtained from the MSRP web site, www.darcnw.noaa.gov/montrose.html.

How can the public get involved? (Public Information)

As described above, once the validated data are provided to OEHHA, that agency will review the data and determine if revisions should be made to the fish consumption advisories. OEHHA will also evaluate white croaker data to make recommendations to California DFG. If needed, the California Fish and Game Commission could modify the existing white croaker commercial catch ban area regulations based on the OEHHA's recommendations.

In addition to the public participation process required for these State actions, the updated fish advisory and white croaker commercial catch ban information will be integrated into the ongoing fish contamination public outreach and education program efforts (via the Fish Contamination Education Collaborative, or FCEC). The members of the FCEC are conducting a

variety of programs designed to educate the affected populations about fish contamination and recommend measures to reduce health risks associated with consuming contaminated fish. Further information about the FCEC may be obtained from www.pvsfish.org.

Who should I contact?

Fish consumption advisory:

Bob Brodberg, Cal EPA Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, (916) 323-4763.

Commercial catch ban designation/revision:

Bob Brodberg, Cal EPA Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, (916) 323-4763;

Dave Parker, California Department of Fish and Game, (562) 342-7179.

Evaluation and Selection of a Sediment Cleanup Plan:

Sharon Lin, USEPA Region 9 Superfund Division, (415) 972-3446.

Restoration of Lost Fishing Opportunities:

Greg Baker, Montrose Settlements Restoration Program, (650) 329-5048.

Public Involvement:

Sharon Lin, USEPA Region 9 Superfund Division, (415) 972-3446