

Getting Out the Word on the Hudson's Fish

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Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, were first discovered in Hudson River fish in 1975. General Electric had used the chemical mixtures in manufacturing capacitors at two upstate factories, and discharged approximately 1.1 million pounds of PCBs into the Hudson from 1947-1977.

Contamination of the Hudson by these persistent, possibly carcinogenic compounds created the largest superfund site in the nation. To clean up the PCBs, dredging of a 40-mile stretch of the Hudson River between the Fort Edward and Troy dams began in 2009.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) banned commercial and recreational fishing on the upper Hudson River in 1976, and banned commercial fishing from the lower Hudson at the same time. While some of the bans have been lifted, the commercial fishery on the Hudson is a thing of the past.

Today, despite DEC recommendations that fish from a significant portion of the river should not be eaten, some people simply do not know about the potential risks from PCB contamination, says Regina Keenan, coordinator for the Hudson River Fish Advisory Outreach Project. "The DEC has a regulation that you can fish, but you cannot take it home, and that's actually because of contamination that's been found there. At the Troy dam a lot of the contamination is held back."

That's where Keenan's efforts come in.

The Outreach Project will enter its third year of funding in June. The New York State Department of Health began the 20-year program in 2008, and awards grants to agencies that conduct outreach about the advisories regarding fish from the Hudson River.

The outreach project puts materials and money in the hands of community partners to deliver information to the public. Four groups initially received funding, including two Cornell Cooperative Extensions, one in Rockland County and one in Dutchess County. Now, those two entities are still working with NYS DOH, as well as another initial fundee, Hudson Basin River Watch and Watershed Assessment Associates.

"Our most important message for the project is that women who are of childbearing age under 50 and children under age 15 should not be eating fish from the Hudson River, at least until after it's been cleaned up," said Keenan. Studies have shown that exposure to high levels of PCBs may be associated with low birth weight as well as nervous and immune system disorders.

Beyond that high-risk group, Keenan said, "then it depends on who you are, where you're fishing and what you catch ... Close to our office here -- we're in Troy -- the fish are pretty highly contaminated. There's only four species that men and women over the age of 50 are advised to eat once a month. As you go further down the river there's less contamination and you can eat a number of species up to once a month, and then some fish you can eat once a week."

Fish PCB levels decrease downstream from the city of Troy, but that doesn't mean the fish are safe. Also, in those lower Hudson areas further from the much-contested and publicized dredging, the public is not as aware of potential problems with fish. Last but not least, cadmium is an issue with crabs in the Hudson, and it concentrates in the tamale of crabs (the gelatinous mass in the heads), which will leech into cooking water if not removed.

Hence the need for widespread educational efforts, such as the recent distribution of signage to 200 food banks that serve people along the nearly 200-mile stretch of river that is affected.

The outreach groups are teaching people about the fish advisory through home visits, at health clinics, and in schools. DOH also partners with others to help deliver their message. The brochures have been made available at Nory Point Environmental Center and other DEC facilities. The Hudson River Fishermen's Association is having a family day, and DOH staff will attend.

Rockland County Cornell Cooperative Extension has a strong environmental program, and they use Americorps volunteers in their fish advisory outreach.

Students go out and talk to people on the river," said Keenan. "(They) developed their own brochure. They developed some signs. They did a bus ad, which was great, and worked with the department of health in Rockland County."

Proprietor of River Haggie Outdoors and environmental educator Fran Martino contracts with the Hudson Basin River Watch to do outreach for the DOH, working in schools in a number of counties.

"I include some type of an art craft project, and I explain to the children that they're going to take home a few things after my visit, snapshot of the advisory," said Martino, who sends kids home from school with a fish magnet printed with the DOH phone number.

At a recent visit, Martino used a rubber fish to explain fish anatomy, which helps kids discuss what kinds of fish they or their parents might be catching. The same fish is used in the art project. Kids paint it and make Japanese-style fish prints.

Talking with kids is important because they can influence their parents' behavior, said Martino. Budget-strapped schools value the free visits. She also attends summer camps and fairs with fish advisory materials.

Creating materials in other languages is another tactic of the DOH.

"You have immigrants who have moved here from other parts of the world," said Keenan. "These chemicals are not something you can smell, taste or in any other way sense, so we have to try and get the message across to them."

A diagram in the materials helps illustrate the fatty areas in the fish where PCBs can accumulate. By removing the skin and the fat of the fish, and filleting the fish, it's possible to reduce the PCB levels by about half.

"We recognize we're not giving people a substitute meal," said Keenan. "We're not in the position to do that, unfortunately. We're at least letting people know that if they prepare it a certain way they can get a lot less PCBs in a meal, which is helpful advice."

Information on New York State Department of Health's fish advisories can be found at <http://nyhealth.gov/fish>. Note the brevity of the address -- just another attempt by DOH staff to float their information to the public as easily as possible.