

## To Fish or Not to Fish? Think Twice

**New warnings caution anglers of Willamette River health risks**

by Ben Jacklet of The Tribune in Portland, Ore. (reprinted with permission; originally published June 15, 2004)

Some Portlanders would no sooner fish their dinner from the Willamette River than they would hunt for wild game in Forest Park.

Others, like Terry Gallant and Mike Klopfenstein, have been fishing the Willamette for years and have no plans to stop now that summer's returning.

So how safe is the Willamette for fishing?

It depends on what you're catching. The latest data shows that migratory fish like spring Chinook salmon are as clean as fish get, while resident fish such as small-mouthed bass are often dangerously loaded with polychlorinated biphenyls, toxic pesticides, dioxin, and other contaminants.

As for sturgeon, the ancient fish that Gallant and Klopfenstein were pursuing on a recent morning on the Willamette, new tests show that they also contain some toxins, though at much lower levels than bass, carp, and other resident fish.

State and county health officials are issuing an updated fish advisory this week and posting new signs along the river warning of the health risks of eating fish caught in the Willamette.

The latest data show that carp contain the most PCBs, at around 2 parts per million, while bass have about 1 part per million and bullhead catfish contain approximately 0.5 parts per million.

Based on those levels of PCBs, scientists are recommending that women beyond childbearing age and healthy men should eat no more than 8 ounces of resident fish from the Willamette per month. Women of childbearing age, children, and anyone with a weak immune system or thyroid or liver problems should avoid eating any carp, bass, or catfish from the Willamette, according to the health advisory.

The new warnings follow a massive fish collection effort performed two years ago. As part of the Portland harbor Superfund investigation, scientists caught about 1,500 fish from the lower Willamette and sent them off to labs to be tested for 399 chemicals.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency still has not released the results from those tests publicly. But David Stone, a toxicologist with the state's health department, confirmed that the

fish advisory and the new batch of warning signs were a direct result of the Superfund investigation.

"We already knew (the pollutants) were in the river sediment, but I think some people are surprised at how much turned up in the fish," Stone said.

The study was funded by the Lower Willamette Group, which consists of the Port of Portland, the city, and harbor businesses that could end up on the hook for a river cleanup running \$200 million or more.

The study is expected to provide important information about the river's fish and the health risks they pose. It also could end up costing the businesses that funded it big bucks.

That's because the more polluted the fish in the harbor turn out to be, the more cleanup ultimately will be

required, potentially translating into greater liability for industrial powerhouses identified by the EPA as "potentially responsible parties," including Oregon Steel Mills Inc., Gunderson Inc., and NW Natural.

addition to bass, catfish, and carp, the study tested suckers, sculpin, and juvenile Chinook salmon for hundreds of chemicals.

The Lower Willamette Group only agreed to collect resident fish and juvenile fish for their study because migratory species such as sturgeon, salmon, and lampreys move around so much that it would be impossible to determine where they ingested any pollutants that might be found in their tissue.

After several public interest groups and Indian tribes argued that migratory species also should be studied, state researchers decided to fill that data gap, taking samples last summer.

Stone said salmon came up "very clean," while sturgeon were "variable."

The state researchers studied five sturgeon just under the limit of 42

Floating trash and discolored water around a nearby outfall pipe didn't stop several people in lawn chairs from casting for panfish.

"My son's a big-time fisherman," Clarence Dorn said. "He talked me into giving it a try here. ... Whatever he brings home, we eat. I got a granddaughter who just loves it. Put a plate in front of her, she gobbles it up."

Further down the bank, in the shade of the massive Freightliner wind tunnel, two men were fishing for bait to use for sturgeon fishing in the Willamette. George Gonzales said he wasn't sure what the health risks were in eating sturgeon.

"I know they move around a lot," he said. "I also know they live a long time. But yeah, I don't know about PCBs."

Williams said his goal is to determine who fishes the Portland river, how often, where and when, and how much of their catch they eat.

"Over the years there have been different things said about who is actually out there catching fish and consuming fish," Williams said. "We can go by generalities and anecdotal evidence, as we have been for years, or we can go out there and talk to the people on the river on a very regimented basis to find out what they're doing."

"Those are the folks and the species of fish that we really need to end up factoring into our cleanup of Portland harbor."

Lyudmila Blashchishena of Russian Oregon Social Services has warned people from Portland's Russian community about the dangers of fish caught in the Willamette as part of a different outreach project.

"But many of them still fish the river and still eat the fish," she said. "They give the fish as gifts or sometimes sell them."

Blashchishena said immigrants are often less aware of environmental health dangers and thus more vulnerable.

"In the Soviet Union you never heard this sort of thing," she said. "No one told us anything."

People who want to learn more about the hazards of fishing the Willamette River can attend a public meeting scheduled for 6:30 p.m. June 29 at the St. Johns Community Center, 8427 N. Central St.

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### Fish Data Long Awaited

The lower Willamette's woes are well-documented. The harbor was designated a Superfund site in December 2000 after scientists found tar, DDT, creosote, PCBs, and dioxin in the sediment at the bottom of the river. Frequent advisories from the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services also warn of raw sewage overflowing into the river during heavy rains.

But information about how the river pollution affects fish and the people who eat them has been surprisingly limited. The first study came in 2000, when *The Oregonian* newspaper teamed up with scientists at Oregon State University to document that fish from the lower river contain several toxins, most notably PCBs.

The Lower Willamette Group's study builds on those findings. In

inches, and while the levels of PCBs they found were far lower than in bass and carp, they were worth noting, Stone said, particularly since PCBs build up in a fish's fatty tissue over time.

"These fish we tested were on the smaller side," Stone said. "With a larger fish, you would expect that they would have accumulated more (toxins)."

Lampreys, the eel-like fish that are harvested near Willamette Falls by tribal fishermen, showed far less contamination than in previous studies, Stone said.

### Who's at Risk?

Questions remain about who fishes the river, where and when, and for which species.

Travis Williams, executive director of Willamette Riverkeeper, is trying to answer those questions this summer. His group is conducting a fish consumption survey funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Spirit Mountain Community Fund.

On a recent afternoon, Williams steered his jet boat into the Willamette backwaters near the Swan Island boat ramp.