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OEHHA Releases Draft Report and “Safe Eating Guidelines” For Fish in the Sacramento River and Northern Delta

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SACRAMENTO – The California Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) has released a new draft report and “safe eating guidelines” for sport fish from the Sacramento River and Northern Delta.

The draft report and guidelines provide information to fish consumers to help them choose the safest fish to eat from the Sacramento River and Northern Delta. They also recommend how often these fish can be eaten to maximize their health benefits, while minimizing the health risks from mercury contamination. They cover fish caught in the Sacramento River from just below Shasta Lake in Shasta County to its confluence with the San Joaquin River, as well as fish from the Northern Delta (including other Delta water bodies north of Highway 12).

OEHHA staff scientists will make a presentation, answer questions and accept public comments on the draft report and guidelines at a public workshop on Wednesday, April 16 in Sacramento. The workshop will be held from 10:30 a.m. to about 1 p.m. in Meeting Rooms A and B of the Samuel Pannell Meadowview Community Center, 2450 Meadowview Road.

“The California Coastal Range has an abundance of naturally occurring mercury that has been mined in the past. So it is not surprising that some of the mercury has worked its way into the fish, such as bass and sturgeon,” said OEHHA Director Dr. Joan Denton. “Fish from these areas can still be part of a healthy, balanced diet if people – especially women of childbearing age and children – carefully monitor their fish consumption and choose species that are lower in mercury.”

The draft report, proposed guidelines and a fact sheet are available for viewing and downloading on OEHHA’s website at www.oehha.ca.gov.

OEHHA’s draft report concludes that many fish species from the Sacramento River and Northern Delta are low enough in mercury to permit consumption at least once a week.

The draft “safe eating” guidelines include one set of recommendations for women ages 18-45, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children ages 1-17. A second set of guidelines is for women over 45 and adult men. Until final guidelines are issued, OEHHA recommends that the public follow the advice in the draft guidelines, as follows (next page):

California Environmental Protection Agency

The energy challenge facing California is real. Every Californian needs to take immediate action to reduce energy consumption.

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Women ages 18-45 and children 1-17 may eat one serving a week of bluegill or other sunfish, crappie, carp, catfish, sucker, hitch, hardhead, or crayfish; or three servings a week of river-run salmon, trout, shad, or clams. They should not eat any largemouth, smallmouth or spotted bass; or pikeminnow.

Women beyond childbearing years and men may eat river-run salmon, trout, shad, or clams daily; or eat three servings a week of bluegill or other sunfish, crappie, carp, catfish, sucker, hitch, hardhead, or crayfish; or one serving a week of largemouth, smallmouth, or spotted bass; or pikeminnow.

OEHHA developed the new guidelines using fish-sampling data produced by the Fish Mercury Project, a three-year study conducted in the Sacramento-San Joaquin watershed, and funded by the California Bay-Delta Authority. Additional historical data was obtained from the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, the Sacramento River Watershed Program, the State Water Resources Control Board, and the University of California, Davis.

Previous guidelines for striped bass and sturgeon from the Bay-Delta also remain in effect:

Women ages 18-45 and children 1-17 should not eat any striped bass over 27 inches, and should eat no more than one serving a month of smaller striped bass (18 to 27 inches) or sturgeon (and only if no other fish are consumed). Women over 45 years and men should not eat any striped bass over 35 inches, and should eat no more than two servings a month of smaller striped bass (18 to 35 inches) or sturgeon (and only if no other fish are consumed). A serving should be measured as the same size and thickness as the palm of your hand. Serve smaller servings to children.

OEHHA previously issued guidelines for the San Joaquin River extending from its confluence with the Sacramento River to Friant Dam (Fresno County) and the Southern Delta (defined as other water bodies south of Highway 12). For further information on these advisories, visit OEHHA's website at www.oehha.ca.gov/fish.html.

Major sources of mercury in the environment are runoff from former gold-mining sites where mercury was used, emissions from coal-burning power plants, and the weathering of mercury-containing rocks. Mercury accumulates in river sediment and is converted by bacteria to the more toxic methylmercury, which fish take in from their diet.

Women can pass methylmercury on to their fetuses through the placenta. Excessive exposure to methylmercury may affect the developing nervous system in children, leading to subtle decreases in learning ability, language skills, attention, or memory. These effects may occur through adolescence as the nervous system continues to develop.

Written comments on the draft guidelines must be received by 5 p.m. on May 27, 2008, at OEHHA's Pesticide and Environmental Toxicology Branch, 1515 Clay Street, 16th floor, Oakland, CA 94612. OEHHA will review all comments, make any appropriate revisions and issue final guidelines.