



FAQ's Associated with the Sabine Lake Fish Consumption Advisory

*Prepared by the Seafood and Aquatic Life Group
December 2011*

Q: What recommendation has the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) made to protect human health?

A: Specific consumption advice, Fish Consumption Advisory 46 (ADV-46), has been issued for Texas waters of Sabine Lake including all contiguous Texas waters. DSHS recommends that adults should limit consumption of gafftopsail catfish to no more than three (3) eight ounce (8 oz) meals per month and pregnant women, women who may become pregnant, women who are nursing infants, and children less than 12 years of age should limit consumption of gafftopsail catfish to no more than one (1) four ounce (4 oz) meal per month from these waters.

Q: What species of fish were tested from Sabine Lake?

A: Alligator gar, black drum, gafftopsail catfish, red drum, sand trout, southern flounder, spotted seatrout, and striped bass.

Q: What are the chemical contaminants of concern in Sabine Lake?

A: Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs)

Q: What are polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)?

A: PCBs are synthetic (man-made) mixtures of up to 209 individual chlorinated compounds (known as congeners). Many commercial PCB mixtures in the U.S. are known by the trade name Aroclor. PCBs are oily liquids or solids that are colorless to yellow. Some PCBs may also exist as a vapor in air. PCBs were once used commercially as coolants and lubricants in electrical transformers and capacitors, heavy-duty electrical equipment in power plants, industries, and large buildings across the country and other electrical equipment, carbonless copy papers, sealing and caulking compounds, paint additives, cutting oils, ballasts in fluorescent light fixtures, and hydraulic fluids. PCBs were valued for chemical stability and fire resistance.

Q: How do PCBs enter the environment?

A: In 1979, The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) banned the manufacture of PCBs in the United States. However, the USEPA did not require removal of PCB-containing materials still in service at the time of the ban. Therefore, some materials remain in use today. The major source of environmental PCBs in the United States today is

from ongoing use, storage, and disposal of products in landfills or improper disposal of products that contain PCBs. PCBs also may be released from sediments disturbed by flooding, dredging, and other activities.

Q: How do PCBs accumulate in fish?

A: PCBs have been found in soil, ground and surface water, air, sediment, plants, and animals in all regions of the world. These contaminants break down very slowly in the environment and accumulate in fatty tissue, skin, and internal organs of fish and other animals. Levels of these contaminants in fish may be hundreds to a million times higher than the concentrations found in water or sediments. The amount of PCBs found in fish varies with species, age, size, fat content, diet, and surface water and sediment concentrations. Generally, larger, older fish will contain higher levels of PCBs than smaller, younger fish; fatty fish such as catfish species and spotted seatrout may contain higher levels of PCBs than lean fish such as southern flounder, red drum, and black drum.

Q: How can PCBs affect my health?

A: PCBs may affect the immune system, reproductive system, liver, impair physical and neurological development of fetuses and children, and may increase the risk of cancer.

Q: What is the source of PCBs in Sabine Lake?

A: DSHS does not attempt to determine contaminant sources. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) is the state agency responsible for identifying contaminant sources.

Q: I have been eating these fish all my life. Will I have adverse health effects?

A: The consumption limits recommended by the DSHS have allowed a margin of safety below those levels that could result in adverse health effects; however, eating more than the recommended amount of fish from Sabine Lake does not necessarily mean that a person will have observable adverse health effects.

Q: Should I stop eating fish?

A: No. Fish are an important source of protein in the diet. The DSHS recommends that you follow general consumption guidelines and/or fish consumption advisories or bans issued for specific water bodies by calling the DSHS Seafood and Aquatic Life Group (512) 834-6757 or by accessing the DSHS Seafood and Aquatic Life Group Web site at <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/seafood>). Fish consumption advisory information is also published in the *Texas Parks and Wildlife Outdoor Annual Hunting and Fishing Regulations* booklet. This booklet is provided to all licensed anglers in Texas.

Q: Will cooking or cleaning fish a certain way reduce the PCBs level?

A: Yes. These chemical contaminants readily accumulate in the fatty tissues of fish. To reduce exposure to these chemicals, the skin, dark (reddish-color) muscle tissue, and fatty portions (i.e. belly fat, side fat, and fat along the top of the back) of the fish should be removed before cooking. The DSHS recommends baking or broiling skinned, trimmed fish on a rack or grill to allow fat to drip away from the fillet. If fish are fried, the frying oil should not be reused. These cooking methods will reduce exposure to many of the most common organic chemical contaminants in fish.

Q: Should I stop fishing?

A: No. Recreational fishing does not need to stop. Consuming fish in amounts recommended by the DSHS poses no significant health risk and catch-and-release fishing eliminates potential health risks.

Q: Should I be concerned about PCBs while participating in contact recreation activities like boating or swimming?

A: There is not a concern for PCB exposure while swimming or participating in other contact recreation activities. Levels in the water are low. The concern is for consumption of fish that concentrate the PCBs in their tissue.

Q: Will the Sabine Lake fish consumption advisory be long term?

A: PCBs are contaminants that persist in the environment for years. Due to the long-lived nature of these contaminants there is a strong likelihood that the Sabine Lake fish consumption advisory could be long term.

Q: Will the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) conduct additional monitoring?

A: The DSHS will continue to monitor fish from Sabine Lake as funding becomes available.

Sources of Information

United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Chemical Fact Sheets
<http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/fish/technical/chemfacts.html>

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) ToxFAQs
<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfags/index.asp>

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Public Health Statements
<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/PHS/Index.asp>