

By Amber Hanneken

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HUGO — Representatives from the Department of Environmental Quality and the Department of Wildlife spoke to a small group Thursday evening at the Choctaw County Library about the recent mercury advisory for Hugo Lake and 15 other lakes in Oklahoma.

Jay Wright and Erin Hatfield from DEQ presented a slideshow that explained the study and what the mercury advisory means for lake goers.

DEQ has been analyzing fish and issuing advisories since 1978. The recent advisory was issued after an extensive study of 50 lakes in Oklahoma. Between fall 2007 and summer 2009, the department collected a total of 536 largemouth bass from various sites of each lake and tested them for mercury, Wright said. Mercury levels ranged from low to high, all lakes with fish that tested above .5 mg/kg of mercury became a priority, he said.

The Department of Wildlife and DEQ then returned to those 17 lakes and collected a total of 871 samples; according to Wright, 20 species were represented. The result was the advisory issued for 16 lakes and 12 species of fish at specific size ranges.

Wright said mercury is a neurotoxin that specifically affects children and fetuses. Because of this, the advisory is split between sensitive populations — women of childbearing age and children up to age 15 — and the general population, which is everyone else. In general, larger fish and predator species like bass, walleye and flathead catfish contain the highest mercury levels. In studies of populations that consume a high amount of fish, Wright said mercury exposure produced problems in cognitive thinking, memory, attention span, motor skills and spatial skills.

In Hugo Lake, there are no limits to fish consumption for the general population. However, the sensitive population should eat no more than two meals per month of black crappie 10 inches and larger, blue catfish 23 inches and larger, flathead catfish 19 inches and larger, largemouth bass 15 inches and larger and white bass 12 inches and larger. Smaller catches of those species have no limitation advisory. Channel catfish, common carp, green sunfish, smallmouth buffalo and white crappie are all safe to eat at any size, according to the study.

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