Freshwater fish in southeastern Oklahoma lakes contain alarmingly high levels of mercury, this according to a recent fish flesh sampling study by the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

The study, released Wednesday, shows that 16 of 35 lakes surveyed had high mercury concentrations of more than 0.5 mg. Among the lakes exceeding the 0.5 mg were Broken Bow, Hugo, Pine Creek, Wister and McGee.

The study included species of black bass, striped bass, white bass, walleye, saugeye and flathead catfish.

"This is not an issue we're going to let drop," said Eddie Terrill, director of the air quality division for the Oklahoma DEQ. "Mercury is a hot-button issue everywhere. How we deal with it moving forward is a big issue."

Mercury is a neurotoxin that can have ill effects on the human brain, spinal cord, kidneys, lungs and liver. It can have devastating effects on fetal development and result in poor intellectual function in children.

About 75 percent of mercury in fish comes from manmade sources such as coal-fired power plants, incinerators, mining and smelting.

Opinions vary on whether mercury rates have more to do with air pollution or rainfall amounts. Southeastern Oklahoma has both: coal-fired power plants and a higher than average mercury concentration in yearly precipitation, according to the National Atmospheric Deposition Program, a nationwide network of precipitation monitoring sites made up of various government and private organizations.

Jay Wright of DEQ's customer services division said officials will retest lakes that had higher than 0.5 mg mercury levels.

The results were sobering, he said, but added that people shouldn't stop eating fish, a healthful source of protein.

"There are low-mercury fish out there. If we quit eating fish what will we replace it with, hot dogs?"

A final report expected in May will result in DEQ-issued fish consumption advisories on specific lakes as well as the probable source.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.