



MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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Fellow Marylanders:

In a recent issue of **EnviroMatters**, we discussed the science behind the Maryland Department of the Environment's advisories on fish consumption. On June 10, 2004, we released new data about striped bass caught in the Chesapeake Bay, based on the largest ever assessment of a fish species by MDE. In this issue, we report on the findings. In the next issue, we will report on an aggressive new effort to provide fish consumption guidelines to families in the Baltimore Harbor area.

As always, your comments and ideas for future issues of **EnviroMatters** are welcome.

Sincerely,

Kendl P. Philbrick
Secretary

July 26, 2004

Three-Year Study of PCBs in Chesapeake Bay Rockfish Results in Consumption Guidelines for State Fish

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are chemical compounds that were used as coolants and lubricants in electrical equipment. Manufacture of PCBs was stopped in the United States in 1977 because they accumulate in the environment and can be harmful to health. They are long-lived and, nearly 30 years later, are still found in the environment and in fish. They are considered to be carcinogenic.

For two decades, MDE has tested fish caught in Maryland waters for PCBs and other contaminants and provided consumption guidelines to fishermen and their families. Early testing focused on areas where contamination was known to be high, notably in Baltimore Harbor, the Potomac River and tributaries in the northern part of the Chesapeake Bay.

In 2001, 2002 and 2003, however, MDE expanded its testing of tested striped bass, or rockfish, based on earlier positive tests in the Potomac. Rockfish were taken at six locations in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. This was a major undertaking: more than 150 rockfish were tested. Moderate levels of PCBs were found, which were consistent with the size and predatory nature of rockfish. The department issued consumption guidelines for recreational fishermen and their families.

According to the MDE guidelines, the general population can safely eat up to 24 8-ounce meals of recreationally caught rockfish a year and women of child-bearing age can eat up to 12 meals a year. The guidelines are included in a new brochure that provides consumption guidelines for popular recreational fish caught in the bay and its tributaries.

The calculations behind MDE's consumption guidelines are conservative. In a population of 100,000 people, if the entire group ate rockfish caught in the same general area for 30 years following MDE guidelines, there would be one additional case of cancer. PCBs are also of concern to the growth and development in unborn babies and young children. The guidelines are designed to protect this sensitive group.

In the long-term, PCB levels in fish caught in Maryland waters will decline as the chemical compounds breakdown or become encapsulated in bottom sediment. In the meantime, while the presence of any contaminant in fish is unwelcome, families that follow MDE's guidelines for fish consumption can safely include rockfish and other species caught in the bay as part of a healthy diet if they follow the guidelines. There are easy ways to prepare and cook the fish to minimize the PCBs that might be present.