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Fish advisories posted during first 'Fishing for Fun; A Family Affair' event

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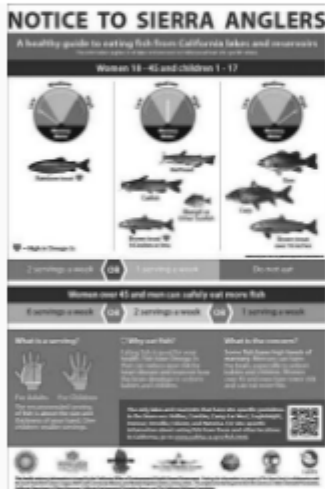
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Frieda Slavia |

A team of 15 community volunteers posted 30 state-issued fish consumption advisories signs at 10 local public fishing spots during a family education event May 21.

The event, "Fishing for Fun; A Family Affair," was held at Seaman's Lodge in Nevada City. It was jointly organized by The Sierra Fund, South Yuba River Citizens League and Wolf Creek Community Alliance.

In addition, several other local organizations and agencies participated with information and fun activities for kids, including the U.S. Forest Service, Gold Country Fly Fishers, Trout Unlimited and the Upper American River Foundation.

About 50 people of all ages attended the event, which focused on increasing public information about mercury in fish. In addition to the postings, there was an educational session where educators told people which locally caught fish are safe to eat and which are better caught and then released due to high mercury content.

"We were so pleased by the enthusiasm of the volunteers who showed up to help us with this long-neglected public health issue," noted Kelsey Westfall of The Sierra Fund, who helped coordinate the

event. "And it was so much fun having the families and children join us this year for the first time at the event."

Kids joined in on age-appropriate activities and games and had a chance to test their new knowledge through trivia questions about which fish are safe to eat, in exchange they received entry to a raffle with prizes donated by local businesses. Meanwhile, teens and parents had an opportunity to talk with experts about fishing locations, the history of mercury in our area, efforts underway to clean it up, and how to protect their family by choosing which fish to eat.

Children squealed with delight when their fishing poles came back with magnetized fish cards using the magnet bait, according to a press release. Other children learned about how mercury attracts (amalgamates) gold by playing with silver and gold colored magnets. Another game used marbles to demonstrate how mercury concentrations increase at higher levels in the food chain. Raffle tickets were awarded to children once they completed each learning game, and a number of prizes donated from local merchants were won by many lucky raffle ticket holders. Gold Country Fly Fishers provided lessons in fly casting as well as opportunities for children to learn how to create and tie a fly. Trout Unlimited offered activities for children to learn about waste in the watershed and provided free T-shirts. The U.S. Forest Service provided information about fishing location and handed out gear to enthusiastic children.

FIRST TIME FOR SOME POSTINGS

For some locations, such as Donner Lake and Little Grass Valley Reservoir, this was the first time the sites had ever been posted with this important information. Anglers at these locations now have the information they need to make smart decisions on which fish are safe to eat and feed to their families, a press release states.

The effort to improve public awareness of safe eating guidelines was augmented by the Nevada Irrigation District and the Yuba River Ranger District of the Tahoe National Forest. This year, NID and the Yuba River Ranger District agreed to post the advisories at the lakes and reservoirs they manage which constitute the majority of public fishing locations in the Bear and Yuba watersheds including Combie and Rollins Reservoirs, Scotts Flat Lake, Bowman Lakes, and the Gold Lakes Basin. Other neighboring agencies have followed suit including Placer County Water Agency which has agreed to post fish advisories at Hell Hole and French Meadows Reservoirs, and the South Feather Water and Power Agency who will post Sly Creek Reservoir.

The information contained in the fish consumption advisory, issued by California's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, is important to anglers in the Sierra Nevada region because of historic mining activity which has led to elevated levels of mercury in local fish. Of the more than 26 million pounds of mercury that was brought to this region for use in processing gold during California's Gold Rush, approximately 10 to 13 million pounds were lost to the environment and remain in our watersheds and ecosystems.

Sport fish consumption is likely the single most significant route by which people are exposed to mercury that remains in the Sierra Nevada foothills from legacy mining activity. Furthermore, some popular sport fish such as bass and brown trout can contain the highest levels of mercury, due to the way mercury enters and accumulates in the longer lived and predatory fish. OEHHA recommends limited or no consumption of these fish for children and women of childbearing age. On the other hand, rainbow trout, another popular sport fish, is generally one of the healthiest options for eating locally caught fish.

The Sierra Fund is surveying anglers now that the advisories are in place to learn about the effectiveness of the new signs.

The fish advisory posting effort is made possible by funding from The California Wellness Foundation, the California Department of Water Resources, and the Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation, with donations of food and prizes from SPD Markets, Briar Patch Co-Op, Safeway, Grocery Outlet, Caroline's Coffee Roasters, Flour Garden Bakery, Emily's Cakes and Catering, Mountain Recreation, Mountain Pastimes, Reel Anglers Fly Shop, Culture Shock Frozen Yogurt, and the Earth Store.