

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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## Low standards for water put fish eaters at heightened risk

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**Tags:** Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation Dave McBride fish consumption Native Americans Oregon Department of Environmental Quality salmon Washington Department of Ecology

### Fish consumption

- The American Heart Association recommends two servings of fish per week, which are high in oils that prevent heart disease, reduce inflammation and lower the risk of developing dementia.

- Eating fish also exposes people to toxins including mercury, lead, PCBs and dioxins.

- Nationwide, about 8 percent of women of child-bearing age have elevated levels of mercury in their blood.

- Fish consumption rates spike among American Indians, recreational fishers and people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent, studies conducted in Washington indicate.

Washington residents eat more fish than the national average – probably no surprise for a state whose borders include the Pacific Ocean and the lower Columbia River.

From salmon and steelhead to walleye and lake trout, fish is a staple of many residents' diets.

Yet the state's water quality standards are based on the assumption that Washington residents eat one 7-ounce serving of fish per month, said David McBride, a toxicologist with the state Department of Health.

As a result, residents are potentially exposed to unhealthy levels of mercury, lead, PCBs and dioxins – waterborne toxins that accumulate in fish tissue and negatively affect brain development and IQ in fetuses and young children. Nationwide, about 8 percent of women of child-bearing age have elevated levels of mercury in their blood.

“The paradox of eating fish is that it provides benefits but also has risks,” McBride said last week during a meeting in Spokane. “Our current discharge standards ... don't protect you.

“Washington uses one of the lowest fish consumption rates in the nation to set water quality standards, but we have some of the highest fish-consuming populations in the nation,” he said.

Fish consumption rates spike among American Indians, recreational fishers and people of

Asian and Pacific Islander descent, studies conducted in Washington indicate. Some members of Puget Sound tribes eat up to 12 ounces of fish per day.

Washington's Department of Ecology has begun the process of reviewing fish consumption levels, with the ultimate goal of tougher water quality standards to protect the health of the fish-consuming public.

Neighboring Oregon has become a national leader on the issue.

After years of urging from Columbia River tribes, Oregon updated its fish consumption rates to 23 meals per month. The push was based on studies documenting that Native Americans eat far more fish than the average population.

Last year, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality adopted tougher pollution discharge standards to reduce toxins flowing into coastal bays, lakes and streams. The standards rank among the nation's most rigorous for water quality.

Washington tribes also support efforts to make native fish safer to eat, said Gary Passmore, environmental trust manager for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.

Before the construction of Columbia and Snake river dams, members of Columbia Plateau tribes ate about 2.2 pounds of fish daily.

The Colville Tribe is constructing a new salmon hatchery downstream from Chief Joseph Dam on the Columbia, with the goal of restoring fish as a key part of tribal members' diets.

"People are eating fish and people are going to eat more fish," Passmore said.

However, reducing toxins in fish will be a lengthy process, even after stricter water quality standards are adopted, he said.

Many of the toxic compounds persist in the environment for decades. The Okanogan River, which forms part of the Colville Reservation's boundary, still has high levels of the long-banned insecticide DDT, which continues to wash into the river from agricultural fields.

"We're scratching our heads about what to do about it," Passmore said. "It has more of an impact on resident fish, which spend more time in the river than migrating salmon."

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