Hair tests detect higher mercury levels in anglers
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Results from hair tests conducted at last year's Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo were released Tuesday and suggest that rodeo contestants had significantly higher levels of mercury in their bodies than would be found in the general population.

The test results were released three days before the start of the 2007 rodeo, which opens Friday. Billing itself as the oldest and largest saltwater fishing tournament in the nation, the Dauphin Island-based rodeo typically attracts more than 3,000 anglers.

The results of the testing, conducted by the national environmental group Oceana, mirror those of hair tests conducted by the Press-Register in 2001, which also showed that local anglers had higher mercury levels than non-anglers. The newspaper's testing in 2001 revealed a range of 0.25 to 10.2 parts per million in coastal residents who were sampled.

Oceana tested 65 contestants at the 2006 rodeo. Its results showed that one out of every three of those contestants had mercury levels above the EPA safe level, and that their average level was 0.93 parts per million, or nearly equal to the safe level. The lowest level detected was 0.09 parts per million, and the highest was above 4 parts per million.

Most fish contain minute amounts of mercury, which can build up in people who consume them regularly. Some large sport fish, however, such as king mackerel or grouper, are known to contain higher levels of mercury.

Mercury exposure from fish has been linked to increased risk of heart attack, memory loss, numbness and tingling in the hands, speech problems and an increased risk of birth defects in children born to women with high mercury levels.

In both sets of hair test data, those who reported eating a lot of fish had the highest mercury levels in their hair, particularly if the fish were large predators, such as king mackerel, cobia or ling, grouper, and Spanish mackerel.
The latest testing conducted by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management showed that most of the species caught in Mobile Bay, Weeks Bay, Wolf Bay or Perdido Bay were low in mercury, including flounder, croaker, white trout, redfish and speckled trout. Oceana's testing showed that people who primarily ate fish known to have low mercury levels, such as flounder, mullet, croaker or catfish, had substantially lower mercury levels. The Press-Register's testing also showed a similar pattern, with even people who ate seafood every day having low mercury levels, provided the seafood did not include large predator fish. For instance, Bayou La Batre residents who reported daily consumption of shrimp, oysters, crabs and smaller fish such as croaker and white trout were found to have mercury levels well below 1 part per million.

"We found that it's not just eating a lot of fish that makes people high," said Kim Warner, who has conducted extensive mercury testing of Alabama waters and conducted the hair testing for Oceana. "They can eat all the shellfish they want, such as oysters or shrimp, or all the low-mercury fish they want, and they are not going to raise their mercury levels above what the EPA considers safe."

Oceana tested north Alabama residents last year as a control group to compare to those people tested at the rodeo. People in the north part of the state were all below the EPA safe level, and primarily ate low-mercury fish such as farm-raised salmon and catfish. The average mercury level found at the rodeo was four times higher than the average level found in north Alabama. Ten percent of women tested at the rodeo had mercury levels above the EPA's safe level, while the average level found in women at the rodeo was twice as high as the national average of 0.20 parts per million.

"I think when people are going out in the rodeo this week, they should keep in mind that some of the fish they keep will be high, particularly because they are going for the largest fish as part of the rodeo," Warner said. She also found that people at the rodeo were generally aware of the mercury issues related to large predator fish. She called that an encouraging sign.

"If you get a big one, it's a good idea to not eat it all at once. Put it in the freezer, eat it over time, especially if you have young children or women of child-bearing age. And keep in mind that there are plenty of good fish out there in the Gulf," Warner said.