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Great Lakes Fish Advisories Show Pollution Levels High in Most Lakes

Report calls for action to reduce toxic chemicals

TORONTO, July 10 /CNW/ - Levels of toxic chemicals in Great Lakes fish are alarmingly high, and are not improving, a report released today by Environmental Defence shows. The report was released to kick off Ontario Family Fishing Weekend, which runs from July 10 to July 12, 2009.

"Fish are still a great choice for our diets, but we need to make sure we are not exposing ourselves to high levels of harmful chemicals," said Mike Layton, Program Manager of Environmental Defence. "The problem will not just go away; we need to take action to protect and clean up our vital natural resources."

The report, *Up to the Gills: 2009 Update on Pollution in Great Lakes Fish*, analyzes the latest fish advisories published by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment for eight species of fish in 13 locations across the Great Lakes. Many categories of fish were found to be somewhat or completely unfit for human consumption. The report also looks at fish advisories over a period of time (2005 to 2009), and finds the situation is not improving.

The major chemical contaminants that cause consumption advisories for Great Lakes fish include mercury, PCBs, pesticides, dioxins and furans. Health effects of these chemicals include damage to the nervous, respiratory and immune system, as well as cancer.

While some lakes showed some improvements since 2005, such as Lake Huron, many areas remain very polluted. In Lake Ontario for example, 40% of the advisories examined in this report stated that it was unsafe to eat the affected fish in any quantity. Larger fish typically receive more severe advisories because they are generally older and have accumulated more toxins in their tissue but in Lake Ontario, even small sizes of fish are receiving the most severe advisories.

Almost 400,000 Canadian anglers fish the Great Lakes every year. The commercial and sport fishing industries are estimated to be worth \$2.45 billion a year. While the report highlights the benefits of fish in a healthy balanced diet, it does caution consumers to watch what kinds of fish they eat and from where.

The governments of Canada and the United States recently announced that they will update the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, the bi-national agreement in place to protect and restore the Great Lakes. First signed in 1972, the agreement has not been revised since 1978.

"A revised and much more improved water quality agreement is key to the sustainability of our Great Lakes," said Dr. Gail Krantzberg, Director of the Centre for Engineering and Public Policy and professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario specializing in Great Lakes Protection and regeneration. "Our governments need to act deliberately and with conviction on a number of urgent threats to make the Lakes great for present and future generations."

The report makes several recommendations on how to protect public health including:

- improving the information used in fish advisories;
- enhancing the delivery of fish advisories to high risk groups;
- preventing fish contamination advisories by reducing pollution from industry, sewage systems, agriculture and urban runoff; and
- enhancing the Canada-U.S. response to threats to fish in the Great Lakes.

Canadians are extremely concerned about the future of freshwater resources. A recent Nanos Research public opinion poll from July 2009 reported that 61 per cent of Canadians thought fresh water was the most important natural resource for Canada's future over oil and gas (21 per cent), forestry (11 per cent) and fisheries (4 per cent). Forty per cent of respondents thought that pollution from industry, agriculture and households was the greatest threat to freshwater resources.

The report, Up to the Gills: 2009 Update on Pollution in Great Lakes Fish, is available to download for free at www.environmentaldefence.ca. The report includes a detailed map of fish consumption advisories over time in various regions across the Great Lakes.

About Environmental Defence: Environmental Defence protects the environment and human health. We research. We educate. We go to court when we have to. All in order to ensure clean air, safe food and thriving ecosystems. Nationwide. www.environmentaldefence.ca

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