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AUG - 2 2005

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For Immediate Release:

Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency (NNEPA) announces the completion of a study of methylmercury and other environmental contaminants in fish at four Navajo Nation lakes. The study was funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). In conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&W) and Navajo Nation Fish and Wildlife Department, NNEPA sought to determine the presence or absence of methylmercury and other environmental contaminants at selected Navajo Nation lakes. Copies of the study are available online at http://ifw2es.fws.gov/NewMexico/EC_reports.shtml.

In March and April 2004 samples of water and fish were obtained from Asaayi, Morgan, Red, and Wheatfields Lakes. Fish tissue samples obtained from Red Lake exceeded the USEPA recommended human health criteria for methylmercury. Fish tissue samples obtained from Asaayi, Morgan, and Wheatfields lakes did not exceed the USEPA recommended human health criteria for methylmercury. Methylmercury in fish tissue samples from Red Lake and selenium in fish tissue samples from Morgan Lake exceed the general dietary concentrations of concern for wildlife, including bald eagles. Water samples revealed elevated aluminum levels at Asaayi, Red, and Wheatfields Lakes and elevated boron levels at Morgan Lake.

Elevated levels of methylmercury are also present in fish collected from Arizona and New Mexico lakes. Additionally elevated levels of methylmercury are being reported in fish throughout the United States. Mercury is a natural element, found in a variety of chemical forms in rocks, soil, water, air, plants, and animals. Mercury has been used in dental fillings, thermometers, fluorescent lights, thermostats, and it is present in some mineral deposits such as coal. Emissions from coal-fired power plants also contain mercury.

The most easily absorbed chemical form of mercury in animals is methylmercury. The major pathway for human exposure to methylmercury is by consuming contaminated fish. Dietary methylmercury is almost completely absorbed into the blood and distributed to all tissues including the brain.

Completion of this study by the Navajo Nation EPA represents the first step toward understanding the distribution of mercury and other contaminants in Navajo Nation surface waters and fish. NNEPA and other agencies are in the process of addressing the findings of this study. For more information about the study and findings contact Steve Austin, NNEPA, at 505-368-1037, or Joel Lusk, USF&W, at 505-761-4709. For specific human health concerns regarding fish consumption it is recommended that a local health care provider be contacted.

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