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ADEQ Announces Mercury Fish Consumption Advisories for Tonto Creek Near Bear Flat Campground to Roosevelt Lake

PHOENIX – (July 20, 2011) – The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, in association with the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Arizona Department of Health Services, has issued a fish consumption advisory recommending that people not eat certain fish caught from a 51-mile stretch of Tonto Creek in Gila County between Hellsgate Wilderness, located one mile downstream of Bear Flat Campground, and Roosevelt Lake.

Tissue samples of fish caught from Tonto Creek recently, and analyzed by ADEQ, contain elevated levels of mercury. The consumption advisory recommends the public not eat smallmouth and largemouth bass, green sunfish and black bullhead catfish caught from this stretch of Tonto Creek. The advisory recommends that common carp caught from this section should not be consumed by children under 6 years and be limited to one eight ounce (uncooked weight) fish serving per month for those between 6 and 16 years and two eight ounce (uncooked weight) fish serving per month for all those over 16 years.

The advisory does not limit the consumption of trout taken from Tonto Creek or the use of this waterbody for fishing, bird watching, swimming or other recreational uses.

Fish are an excellent source of protein and can be an important part of a healthy, diverse diet. Because mercury has been detected in some fish from Tonto Creek, it is prudent to advise the public and offer this consumption advisory.

“Consuming fish contaminated with mercury is the most common method of human exposure to mercury,” said ADEQ Director Henry Darwin. “While we continue to work to reduce mercury pollution in Arizona’s waterbodies, these fish consumption advisories are an important part of our effort to protect public health.”

Mercury in the environment can come from various sources and can cause numerous health problems when ingested, most notably its toxicity to the central nervous system. Infants and pregnant or nursing mothers are considered most at risk to possible health effects. Mercury is quickly absorbed by bacteria in sediments and passed along via the food chain to living organisms. Fish can accumulate elevated levels of mercury when larger fish consume smaller fish and insects which have become contaminated, a process called bioaccumulation.

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In addition to Tonto Creek, fish consumption advisories remain in place for the following waterbodies in Arizona: Lake Pleasant, Roosevelt Lake, Arivaca Lake, Alamo Lake, Parker Canyon Lake, Upper Lake Mary, Lower Lake Mary, Lyman Lake, Pena Blanca Lake, Coors Lake, Soldier Lake, Soldier Annex Lake and Long Lake.

For more information, see ADEQ's fish consumption advisory fact sheet <http://www.azdeq.gov/environ/water/assessment/download/fish-0711.pdf>, frequently asked questions about Tonto Creek http://www.azdeq.gov/environ/water/assessment/download/fish_tontofaq.pdf, the EPA's consumption advisories <http://www.epa.gov/mercury/advisories.htm>, and Game and Fish's consumption advisory http://www.azgfd.gov/h_f/fish_consumption.shtml

ADEQ officials are continuing to test Tonto Creek to identify the source of contamination. The advisories will remain in effect until further notice.

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