
Ohio River fish caught by citizen scientists show mostly low contaminant levels

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Contact: Michael Washburn
Executive Director
646-575-1787
michael@kwalliance.org

LOUISVILLE, KY - Louisville, KY – Fish caught by Humana Community Day and other volunteer citizen scientists at a Participatory Science Fishing Day at the Falls of the Ohio State Park in August contained safe levels of most contaminants according to recently completed analysis by University of Louisville researchers. Testing showed the fish did contain levels higher than limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for a few contaminants, however, indicating a need for careful attention to fish consumption and additional environmental monitoring.

The fishing event was organized by Kentucky Waterways Alliance (KWA) and UofL's Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute to help monitor the health of the Ohio River and its fish populations. Additional support was provided by Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (Kentucky chapter), two centers affiliated with Envirome – the Center for Healthy Air, Water and Soil and the Center for Integrative Environmental Health Sciences – along with the Falls of the Ohio Foundation and Humana Foundation.

UofL researchers and KWA arranged for laboratory testing of the channel catfish and freshwater drum caught from the Ohio River at the Clarksville, Ind. park by volunteer anglers for an array of contaminants: heavy metals, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances – known as forever chemicals. Researchers then compared these laboratory results with screening values and action levels from the EPA and the FDA.

Levels of the contaminants found in the fish were generally low, with most samples falling within safe consumption thresholds. One metal that exceeded EPA recommended screening levels was selenium, a naturally occurring heavy metal that can be affected by a fish's age and diet. PCB levels for all fish samples were well below the FDA's consumption action level threshold of 2.0 mg/kg of fish. However, PFOS, a forever chemical, was slightly above the EPA screening level in the freshwater drum. All forever chemicals were below recommended levels in catfish samples.

“These results highlight the need for continued monitoring of contaminants and will be used to inform ongoing waterway restoration efforts and updated consumption guidelines for fish caught in the Ohio River,” said Ted Smith, director of the Center for Healthy Air, Water and Soil. “This project is a powerful example of participatory science, allowing local residents to engage directly in environmental health research and contribute to the assessment of waterway health.”

The data gained from this event will support ongoing research and advocacy for cleaner water policies, helping to ensure the long-term health and sustainability of the Ohio River, the source of drinking water for millions of people, and its ecosystems.

The idea of a fishing day to enlist local volunteers in monitoring contaminant levels in the Ohio River first arose at the Association for the Advancement of Participatory Sciences regional conference hosted by the Envirome Institute's Center for Healthy Air, Water and Soil in the spring of 2024.



A volunteer angler receives help with a fishing rod at the Participatory Science Fishing Day



Volunteer anglers caught freshwater drum and catfish at Falls of the Ohio State Park. The fish were analyzed for contaminants by University of Louisville researchers.

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About Kentucky Waterways Alliance: Since 1993, Kentucky Waterways Alliance (KWA) has been the only statewide nonprofit organization focused on waterways in Kentucky. KWA works with communities on local watershed issues and advocates for better policies and programs at the state and national levels. With a mission to protect, restore, and celebrate Kentucky's waterways, KWA's work is making a difference in the quality of life for all Kentuckians. Learn more at <https://www.kwalliance.org>

About Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (Kentucky chapter): Backcountry Hunters & Anglers seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting, through education and work on behalf of wild public lands, waters, and wildlife. Learn more at www.backcountryhunters.org/kentucky.

About the Falls of the Ohio Foundation: The Falls of the Ohio Foundation is comprised of a group of local community and business leaders who seek to connect the region and Falls of the Ohio community to steward its historic stories and natural resources. Its mission is to inspire a sense of wonder in the Falls of the Ohio region through education, preservation, and exploration. Learn more at <https://fallsoftheohio.org/>