

March 25, 2007

Drug flushing could affect fish, feds say

By [John McCoy](#)

Staff writer – Charleston Gazette

Fish that die, fish that develop growths and fish that spontaneously switch sexes have goaded federal fisheries scientists into action.

Earlier this week, officials of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the American Pharmacists Association began urging Americans to be more careful when they throw away unused or expired medicines.

“Medications that are flushed down the toilet or thrown straight into the garbage can and do find their way into our nation’s waterways every day,” said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall. “Those drugs are present in water that supports many species of fish and other wildlife. We are concerned about reports of fish abnormalities possibly caused by improperly disposed prescription medications.”

Male smallmouth bass in West Virginia’s South Branch River, for example, have begun to develop ovaries. Scientists suspect that the changes occurred because people along the river might have flushed birth control pills and other “endocrine-altering substances” down their toilets. An alternative theory holds that runoff from the area’s many poultry farms might be causing the problem.

Subsequent studies revealed that similar problems exist in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Colorado.

Fish and Wildlife administrators plan to team with pharmacists to reveal the dangers of improper drug disposal. In addition to holding special events to promote the initiative, they will distribute brochures and maintain a Web site to answer people’s questions.

Essentially, officials say, proper medicine disposal involves just a few steps:

- Do not flush unused medications. Even though consumers were once advised to flush expired or unused prescriptions, recent environmental impact studies report that it could have an adverse impact on the environment.

Because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has recommended flushing of drugs that have a high abuse potential, consumers should read the instructions on medication labels and consult with pharmacists.

- Protect children and pets from the potentially negative effects by crushing medications or dissolving them in water and mixing them with kitty litter, sawdust or similarly absorbent material. The material should then be placed in sealed plastic bags before being tossed into the trash.
- Remove and destroy all identifying personal information from medication containers.
- Check for approved state and local collection programs or with area hazardous waste facilities. In certain states, you may be able to take your unused medications to your community pharmacy.
- Consult with pharmacists. They can advise on proper disposal techniques.

To contact staff writer John McCoy, use e-mail or call 348-1231.