

GREENWIRE

WATER POLLUTION: Human activity blamed for intersex fish (02/08/2008)

The widespread development of eggs in male fish in the Potomac River is the result of human activity, according to a report released today by federal scientists. The report shows the fish symptoms are worse in streams near towns or heavily farmed areas.

The report does not pinpoint the exact cause of the “intersex” condition among fish, but it is possibly the result of farm chemicals or treated sewage, which can contain human hormones or residue from birth-control pills. Any of these hormones could fool the fishes’ natural hormone system and lead male fish to display female characteristics, according to the scientists.

“I feel comfortable saying human activity” is the cause, said Vicki S. Blazer, a scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey and the primary author of the study. “The question is, which human activity? And is it something we can do anything about?”

The study found some intersex fish in relatively pristine waters, but the problem was much worse in areas heavily affected by runoff from farms and towns. At two of three sites in the Shenandoah River, which runs through an area of Virginia thick with poultry farms, every fish dissected was carrying eggs. Scientists are investigating whether carrying eggs, or any other symptoms associated with egg-causing pollutants, are harmful to the fishes’ immune systems and organs (David A. Fahrenthold, Washington Post, Feb. 8). -- PR