Author's Accepted Manuscript

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/ww.elsevier.com/locate/envres

 PII:
 S0013-9351(18)30432-8

 DOI:
 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2018.08.001

 Reference:
 YENRS8024

To appear in: Environmental Research

Received date: 23 April 2018 Revised date: 25 July 2018 Accepted date: 2 August 2018

Cite this article as: Patricia A. Fair, Natasha D. White, Beth Wolf, Stephen A Arnott, Kurunthachalam Kannan, Rajendiran Karthikraj and John E. Vena, Persistent organic pollutants in fish from Charleston Harbor and tributaries, South Carolina, United States: A risk assessment, *Environmental Research*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2018.08.001

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Persistent organic pollutants in fish from Charleston Harbor and tributaries, South Carolina, United States: A risk assessment

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Abstract

Fish consumption is an important route of exposure to persistent organic pollutants (POPs) in dolphins as well as humans. In order to assess the potential risks associated with these contaminants, 39 whole fish and 37 fillets from fish representing species consumed by dolphins and humans captured from Charleston Harbor and tributaries, South Carolina, USA, were measured for a suite of POPs. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were the predominant contaminant with concentrations ranging from 5.02 to 232.20 ng/g in whole fish and 5.42 to 131.95 ng/g in fillets (weight weight ww) followed by total organochlorine pesticides (OCPs) and polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs). Total POPs levels varied by location and species with general trends indicating significantly higher levels in fish from the Cooper (93.4 ng/g ww) and Ashley Rivers (56.2 ng/g ww) compared to Charleston Harbor (31.6 ng/g ww). Mullet and spot were found to have significantly higher PCBs, OCPs and total POPs, 2-3 times higher than red drum; mullet were also significantly higher in OCPs compared to seatrout. PCB concentrations in whole fish and fillets exceeded EPA human screening values for cancer risk in all fish sampled. For PCBs in fillets, all samples had values of maximum allowable meals per month that were less than the EPA, FDA guidelines for recommended fish meals per month, suggesting lower (more stringent) allowable fish meals per month. All fish exceeded PBDE wildlife values and all fish except two exceeded the level where 95% of the dolphin population would have tissue levels below the health effect threshold. Considering that POP concentrations in fish potentially consumed by humans exceed human health effect thresholds levels, consumption advisories should be considered as a prudent public health measure.

Key words:

Persistent organic pollutants (POPs); Charleston Harbor; marine fish; human risk assessment; dolphin

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