

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
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S.B. 1214
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AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Mercury can cause serious harm to humans and wildlife. Exposure is especially dangerous to the unborn and young children because of risk of neurological damage, including impairment of memory, language, and motor skills.

The Texas Department of State Health Services posts fish consumption advisories at approximately a dozen lakes and rivers, as well as some areas of the coastal waters. These advisories (and impaired water decisions) are based on the state's position that warnings should be posted and state regulatory actions should be considered if contamination in fish reaches or exceeds 0.7 mg/kg. Were Texas to use a 0.3 mg/kg level, a mercury level for regulatory actions recommended by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, for consumption advisories, the state would provide advisories on five to 10 times the number of water bodies it currently covers.

Without information on the extent of contamination in waters in Texas, the public does not have a realistic picture of potential risks or areas of concern. Maps showing different levels of contamination or lists of water bodies with levels of contamination in fish would provide better information to allow people to decide on their fish consumption.

As proposed, S.B. 1214 requires the executive commissioner of the Health and Human Services Commission to annually issue or update consumption advisories for mercury contamination in fish, crustaceans, molluscan shellfish, and other aquatic or terrestrial animals in certain areas.

[**Note:** While the statutory reference in this bill is to the Texas Department of Health (TDH), the following amendments affect the Department of State Health Services, as the successor agency to TDH.]

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

Rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the executive commissioner of the Health and Human Services Commission in SECTION 1 (Section 436.092, Health and Safety Code) of this bill.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Subchapter G, Chapter 436, Health and Safety Code, by adding Sections 436.092 and 436.093, as follows:

Section 436.092. SURVEY. (a) Authorizes the executive head of the Texas Department of Health (director) (TDH) to rely upon surveys of the levels of mercury and mercury compounds in fish, crustaceans, molluscan shellfish, and other aquatic or terrestrial animals living in or near bodies of water in or bordering on this state that have been conducted by state and federal agencies, institutions of higher education, or other organizations that the director determines reliable.

(b) Requires the director to annually notify the public of the survey results and of any declaration of a prohibited area or consumption advisory necessary based on the survey results.

(c) Authorizes the executive commissioner of the Health and Human Services Commission (executive commissioner) to adopt rules governing the surveys used or public notifications required under this section.

Section 436.093. CONSUMPTION ADVISORY FOR MERCURY. (a) Requires the executive commissioner, annually, to issue or update consumption advisories for fish, crustaceans, molluscan shellfish, and other aquatic or terrestrial animals living in or near bodies of water in or bordering on this state if the surveys under Section 436.092 indicate that levels of methyl mercury in the tissues of fish or other animals that are consumed by the public equal or exceed 0.3 mg/kg.

(b) Authorizes the executive commissioner to issue a consumption advisory if the survey shows levels lower than 0.3 mg/kg if the executive commissioner determines that the risks of consumption of the animal require an advisory.

(c) Requires that the consumption advisory distinguish risks related to particular fish or other animal species and risks to sensitive or at-risk populations, such as children.

(d) Requires the executive commissioner, in consultation with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission and other state or federal agencies, to post consumption advisories on the Internet website of TDH, at any public body of water that is the subject of an advisory, and through any other means of public notification that the executive commissioner determines appropriate.

(e) Requires TDH to provide on its Internet website a map of public bodies of water in this state for which a consumption advisory or a consumption ban has been issued.

(f) Requires TDH to provide on its Internet website information advising the public of the risks of consuming fish or other animals covered by a consumption advisory under this section.

(g) Authorizes TDH to use its Internet website or other means to educate the public about the risks of consumption of fish or other animals with elevated levels of mercury or mercury compounds.

SECTION 2. Provides that a consumption advisory is not required to be issued before February 1, 2010, notwithstanding Sections 436.092 and 436.093, Health and Safety Code, as added by this Act.

SECTION 3. Effective date: upon passage or September 1, 2009.