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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "ARTICLE DID A DISSERVICE" LETTER TO THE EDITOR  
REFERENCING 22 MARCH 1996 ARTICLE NSY PORTSMOUTH ME  
4/20/1996  
PORTSMOUTH HERALD

# OPINION

Portsmouth Herald (N.H.) Saturday, April 20, 1986

## Letters to the Editor

### Article did a disservice

To the Editor:

I am very concerned that your March 22 article about the health risks of eating fish from Portsmouth Harbor didn't quite tell that whole story, and may further confuse your readers about this important issue.

Your story was based on coverage of a recent meeting of the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), which advises the Navy on issues related to the ongoing identification and cleanup of toxic wastes at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. The board was hearing a presentation on the development of environmental protection standards for water and sediments surrounding the shipyard (to answer the question, "how clean is clean?"), and a portion of that presentation involved the discussion of preliminary results of an ongoing Human Health Risk Assessment (which attempts to answer the question "are the fish safe to eat?").

A report from the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) was referred to in your article as concluding that the public is not at risk from eating fish or shellfish from areas around the shipyard. The fact of the matter is that ATSDR is not empowered to make such a determination and no representative from that agency was at the RAB meeting to explain their report (not surprisingly, since it wasn't the real subject of the meeting).

The agencies actually responsible for determining the safety of fish consumption and whether or not to issue a health advisory are the Maine Department of Human Services, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, and their counterparts in New Hampshire, none of whom were consulted for the article. These agencies are still waiting for more data and analysis from the Navy before any official government pronouncement is made on the issue. From what I hear, the process is expected to be concluded in the next few months, and I'm sure that they will be willing to explain their decision in detail then.

In short, the real story is that the jury is still out on whether it is truly safe to eat fish and shellfish from areas around the shipyard, especially for women of childbearing age, children and subsistence fishers. I realize that it's often tempting to jump on a positive sounding story or a simple answer to a complicated issue, but the public is not well-served when the media jumps the gun and may have to eat its words later.

Doug Bogen  
Community Co-chair,  
PNSY Restoration  
Advisory Board