

✓ FISH + FISHING Study gives bay fish a clean bill of health

By JOHN ROBINSON
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SANTA CRUZ — Seafood from the Monterey Bay remains unspoiled and uncontaminated by chemicals and other pollutants, a detailed state study has found.

Scientists tested more than 400 fish, some caught at the most unsavory spots in the bay, and found that none had dangerous levels of carcinogens or other pollutants.

"Monterey Bay has been given a clean bill of health and I think we can all breathe a huge sigh of relief," said Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey.

By testing the fish, scientists are able to

gauge the overall water quality of the bay, as dangerous chemicals tend to collect in fish flesh.

The fish were caught at 13 different locations, including off the Santa Cruz City sewage outfall, the Municipal Wharf and off Capitola, as well as off Moss Landing, in the Monterey Canyon, Monterey Harbor and at several popular rockfishing areas. A wide variety of fish were taken, including squid, perch, sand dabs, flounder and rockfish.

The fish were tested for 39 different pesticides and PCBs, as well as lead and tributyltin. The testing lasted five years.

The most common chemical detected,

was DDT, a pesticide now banned by the federal government. But in most species, the chemical was virtually undetectable, or found in very low concentrations and not considered a health hazard, scientists reported.

The only fish found with high levels of dangerous chemicals was the sable fish, also known as black cod and marketed as butterfish. Scientists found up to 308 parts per billion of PCBs, as well as DDT in the fish. While still below levels that are considered a health hazard, it is of concern, the report stated.

Scientists said that the sable fish, which migrates from as far as Japan to the deep

waters of the Monterey Bay Canyon, may not be a good indicator for Monterey Bay, as the fish lives up to 50 years and tends to accumulate chemicals due to its high fat content.

In a report issued Monday, scientists noted that contamination levels in sable fish have been steadily decreasing over the past two decades. They also estimated the lifetime cancer risks of someone eating one sable-fish meal a week at one in 10 million. How that figure was reached was not detailed in the report.

The testing was done by UC Santa Cruz scientists, along with state and federal agencies including the state Department of

Fish and Game.

Fish caught in the Monterey Bay are among the least contaminated in the state, especially when compared to Southern California, and fisheries near pulp mills in Northern California where health warnings have been issued against eating some fish, Farr said.

"In every case the levels of chemicals found in Monterey Bay fish were much lower than those in fish sampled in Southern California water," Farr said. "While several fisheries have been closed down south due to levels that can cause cancer, the state has no reason to issue health warnings for local fish."