White Paper Study of Fish Contaminants in Lakes in the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Fishing Territory

U.S. EPA Environmental Justice or Other Appropriate Programs

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Overview

The Keweenaw Bay Indian Community (KBIC) is the successor in interest of the L'Anse and Ontonagon Bands of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, and signatories to the 1842 Treaty with the Chippewa (7 Stat. 591) and the 1854 Treaty with the Chippewa (10 Stat. 1109). Our community has long relied on subsistence harvesting throughout the landscape, and the fish harvest is particularly central to our harvesting lifeways. However, we are also aware that fish are contaminated with harmful bioaccumulative toxicants, and at this time, there are substantial lacks in fish contaminant data, cumulative toxicity impacts to human health, and outreach materials to guide safe cultural fishing practices in our community. In working with our research partners, we understand that there is an urgent need to estimate the cumulative toxicity of contaminants in fish throughout the study region and to evaluate statistical predictors of cumulative toxicity. Such research can provide decision-making guidance for KBIC, informing environmental policy, management strategies and educational initiatives, all of which supports the health and wellbeing of our fish-reliant community. In order to address these priorities, KBIC requests funding assistance from the Environmental Protection Agency to support this research with Michigan Technological University ("Michigan Tech") and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC). In what follows, we provide the study's rationale and describe a potential workplan.

Rationale

Toxic, bioaccumulative contaminants present threats to the availability and safety of traditional food sources and therefore infringe on the treaty rights of many tribal communities.

Contamination of fish by toxic atmosphere-surface exchangeable pollutants or "ASEPs" is a transboundary, cross-scale, global problem with long-term impacts on ecosystem and human health (Perlinger et al., 2016). Fishing communities share a disproportionate burden from toxic contaminants (Basu et al., 2013; Boucher et al., 2014; Cassady, 2007; Donatuto et al., 2011; O'Neill, 2007; Ranco, 2001; Turyk et al., 2012). Fish production represents a prominent ecosystem service (Steinman et al., 2017; Sterner et al., 2020) and a nutritious food supply (Rideout and Kosatsky, 2017; Williams et al., 2017) to many Indigenous communities. Among the eleven member-tribes served by the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), the average fish consumption rate is 10-fold higher than the U.S. average (O'Neill, 2004). For tribal communities, the value of inland and Great Lake (GL) fisheries is heightened due to community reliance for subsistence and income, and also for cultural heritage and

traditions. Toxicants disrupt cultural practices, and prevent the transmission of generational cultural knowledge (Gagnon, 2016; Hoover, 2013; NEJAC and Council), 2002; O'Neill, 2007; Ranco et al., 2007). Thus contaminants impair ecological, cultural, and educational health metrics for Indigenous communities. For all these reasons, many fish-reliant communities cannot or will not adhere to advisory recommendations. Threats to the availability and safety for consumption of fish negatively impact the health and wellbeing of the 100+ Indigenous nations within the GL region currently served by 36 tribal and inter-tribal governmental entities in the

U.S. **Redressing the burden of fish contamination is a pressing societal need** because many tribes as well as the general population of the Great Lakes region consume contaminants (via fish) at rates above accepted human health criteria (O'Neill, 2004) and lack the information required to maintain a safe fish-reliant diet.

A large number of chemicals, including legacy as well as new and emerging chemicals of concern, bioaccumulate to unhealthy levels in fish. For nearly five decades, monitoring of fish contaminants has shown chemical compounds at concentrations unsafe for GL area residents (GLIFWC, 2016; U.S.EPA, 2017). Many emerging contaminants have been found in fish, and many others likely remain to be analyzed (Crimmins et al., 2018; Deere et al., 2020; Fernando et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2018); however, the cumulative or mixture toxicity of all contaminants is unknown (Davis et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2018; Gandhi et al., 2017; Hernandez et al., 2013). A significant challenge faced by fish-reliant communities is that toxic contamination is largely invisible (Gagnon et al., 2018). Nonetheless, multiple studies have documented an increase in contaminant exposure associated with consumption of GL fish (Christensen et al., 2016; Hanrahan et al., 1999; Humphrey et al., 2000). Human cohort studies have documented developmental impacts from fish contaminants at consumption rates existing in the GL region (Han et al., 2016; Jacobson and Jacobson, 1996a, b; Jacobson et al., 1984). In response, government agencies rely on fish consumption advisories or guidelines, advisory "recommendations" to limit consumption or to avoid particular water bodies and fish species (GLIFWC, 2016; MDCH, 2012; U.S.EPA, 2017). Currently, more than 80% of advisories in the

U.S. relate to mercury and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination. All five Great Lakes have fish consumption advisories for PCBs, and three have advisories for mercury.

GL states account for more than half of the nation's total advisories (EPA, 2013), and all GL states have state-wide mercury advisories for fresh-caught fish (EPA, 2013; MDCH, 2012). For these reasons, an initial, small-scale project could focus on mercury and PCB contamination of fish, but we acknowledge the need for study of the larger mixture of contaminants of concern. Our research partners at MTU have the analytical capacity to examine numerous contaminants in both targeted and non-targeted strategies as funding permits.

It is widely recognized that the cumulative toxicity of mixtures of environmental contaminants may exceed the toxicity of the individual contaminants (Altenburger et al., 2015; Androutsopoulos et al., 2013; Hernandez et al., 2013). Even in the absence of common molecular mechanisms for toxicity, one contaminant may activate or inhibit receptors and transporters for other contaminants (Nicklisch et al., 2016) or interfere with the degradation of other contaminants (Cedergreen, 2014). Due to our limited understanding of mechanisms for mixture toxicity (Altenburger et al., 2015) and the infrequency of synergistic reactions (Cedergreen, 2014), it has been argued that chemical additivity (CA) is the simplest, most appropriate model to estimate cumulative toxicity (Backhaus and Faust, 2012; Gandhi et al., 2017; Kortenkamp et al., 2009). Direct evidence of additive toxicity of mercury and PCBs, as well as of PCBs and polychlorinated dioxins and furans has been obtained in experimental

studies (Costa et al., 2007; Goldoni et al., 2008; Van den Berg et al., 2006), and epidemiological studies offer further evidence (Boucher et al., 2010; Boucher et al., 2016; Boucher et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2003). We suggest that there is an urgent need to estimate the cumulative toxicity of contaminants in fish throughout the study region and to evaluate statistical predictors of cumulative toxicity.

Measurements of fish contaminants are sparse in remote, rural locations. There are approximately 5,000 lakes in Michigan's Upper Peninsula larger than one hectare and approximately 350 state-maintained boat access sites, but only 75 lakes with measurements of walleye mercury concentrations (Perlinger et al., 2018) and only 16 with measurements of walleye PCB concentrations (Shaw and Urban, 2020; Sokol, 2015); contaminant concentrations in other fish species are even more sparse (Evers et al., 2011). More sparse yet are measurements of the myriad contaminants of emerging concern (CEC) (Davis et al., 2016; Deere et al., 2020; Elliott et al., 2018; Elliott and VanderMeulen, 2017; Moore et al., 2018). An NSF- funded collaborative project between KBIC and Michigan Tech that will start in 2021 will measure PCBs in a few more Michigan lakes; with additional funding, that project could also perform nontargeted analyses for CECs. Because resources are never adequate to measure fish contaminants in all lakes of interest, it is desirable to have means of predicting contaminant concentrations for lakes lacking such measurements. Empirical, multi-variate statistical models for the entire UP have previously been developed that relate measurements of contaminant concentrations in walleye (76 for Hg, 16 for PCBs) to characteristics of the lakes and watersheds (Privadarshini, 2018; Sokol, 2015). However, data for more lakes are required to strengthen these models.

Static measurements of fish contaminant concentrations can provide guidance on where it is safest to harvest fish (e.g., DeWeese et al., 2009), but do not provide guidance on other management options. Simultaneous modeling of fish contaminant concentrations and community or population dynamics can guide management by predicting impacts of management actions on fish populations as well as contaminant concentrations. Such modeling can be done at multiple levels of effort and complexity. In the simplest approach, statistical relationships between lake characteristics and fish contaminants can be used in conjunction with statistical models of fish diet, growth and bioaccumulation (Lepak et al., 2012a; Lepak et al., 2012b) to evaluate the potential impacts of fish management strategies on contaminant concentrations in top predator species. A slightly more involved approach is to combine known historical and predicted future trajectories of contaminant deposition with simple models of contaminant cycling linked with fish bioaccumulation factors (BAFs) (Brown et al., 2007; Khan, 2018; Knightes, 2008). At the highest level of complexity, contaminant mass balance models can be combined with food web models (e.g., EcoSim with EcoPath) (McGill et al., 2017; Walters and Christensen, 2018) to predict contaminant concentrations throughout the food web. The existing Ecosim with Ecopath model for Lake Superior (Kitchell et al., 2000) needs to be updated with the wealth of information gathered over the past 20 years.

A variety of metrics (e.g., natural capital, ecosystem services, habitat equivalency, risk, resiliency) may be used to assess impacts of environmental decisions and hence to guide resource management (Costanza et al., 1997; Costanza et al., 2014). However, these metrics can vary with the spatial scale considered as well as the stakeholders considered (Hein et al., 2006), involve tradeoffs among ecosystem services (Nelson et al., 2009), and often fail to adequately incorporate cultural and social values into the valuation (e.g., Chan et al., 2012a; Chan et al.,

2012b; Costanza et al., 2017; Hein et al., 2006). For fish contamination, health risk is often the metric used to guide decision making or consumption advisories (e.g., MDCH, 2012), but that approach ignores issues of food sovereignty, available alternatives, health benefits of fish consumption, and impairments to cultural values and practices (Gagnon et al., 2018). Indigenous Health Indicators (IHI) were developed to circumvent some of these shortcomings (Donatuto et al., 2016). Metrics selected for this study should be meaningful to both the tribes and to EPA.

<u>Workplan</u>

The objectives of the proposed project are: 1) to develop an understanding of the concentrations of individual (mercury, PCB) and combined contaminants in fish that will allow quantitative prediction of concentrations in any area lakes; 2) to develop a model of the relationships between the population size and age structure of fish communities and the associated contaminant concentrations; and 3) to use these tools to develop (a) outreach mechanisms (maps, phone apps) to inform our tribal members of fish safety in any area lake as well as (b) strategies whereby we might manage resources on tribal lands to maximize indicator metrics within the tribal-landscape system. We propose to demonstrate a strategy involving tribally-directed research and outreach locally in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. We

suggest that this strategy could subsequently be applied with the more than 100 tribal communities across the GL region. Below we briefly outline a sequence of tasks to accomplish these objectives.

Tasks:

1. Develop/Choose an appropriate set of metrics to guide decisions regarding resource stewardship and education programs: KBIC has familiarity with a variety of metrics having previously worked with Indigenous Health Indicators (Abt Associates Inc., 2020), ecosystem service valuation (Fletcher and Cousins, 2019), and the culturally sensitive risk-based maps prepared by GLIFWC for mercury in fish (DeWeese et al., 2009). As a community, we will select the metrics most appropriate to the current project.

2. Assess the current status of the selected indicator metrics for regional lakes that have importance/significance to KBIC related to fish:

2a. Identify a lake set in which fish harvesting is important to KBIC: KBIC already has identified 27 lakes of particular interest for fish harvest; of these, 16 have had some measurements of mercury in walleye, and four have had some measurements of PCBs in walleye.

2b. Enlarge the database on fish contaminant concentrations and fish communities in regional lakes: We propose to obtain whole fish samples from our community fishers and to analyze these for both mercury and PCBs. For the lakes in which mercury has been measured but PCBs have not, we propose to obtain archived walleye tissue from the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), and to measure PCBs in those samples.

2c. Develop statistical, predictive models of fish contaminant concentrations as a function of lake and watershed characteristics as described above. Using existing data, we will develop similar models for different spatial extents and to evaluate the error of model predictions as a function of spatial scales. The scales we propose to use include the six- county area fished by the KBIC and the 1842 Ceded Territory. In this project we will also develop similar models for the combined toxicity of the two contaminants. Because

each contaminant responds to different driving variables in the statistical models, the combined toxicity model may not mirror either of the individual contaminant models.

3. Use models of fish community dynamics and contaminant concentrations to investigate the impact of potential management actions on the chosen indicator metrics: We propose to apply three levels of complexity to determine which approach yields satisfactory predictions with the least effort. Model runs with and without implementation of management actions will be used to evaluate the potential magnitude of impact of management strategies. Again, all models will predict both individual contaminant concentrations as well as the cumulative toxicity of the two contaminants in multiple fish species. The outcomes of the modeling will be used to evaluate effects of alternative resource management strategies (harvesting, stocking, etc) on the indicator metrics to identify favorable options.

4. Create community-directed outreach materials to enable fishers to view the lakespecific metrics across the tribal-landscape system: Outreach materials might take the form of printed materials, online-accessible maps, online story maps, phone apps, or dial-up information. Maps can be created using GIS and posted on KBIC and GLIFWC websites alongside explanatory materials. These maps would be patterned after the GLIFWC mercury maps (https://www.glifwc.org/Mercury/index.html). KBIC and GLIFWC will direct the creation of desired outreach formats (mobile apps, story maps) and materials, and research partners will support the development of community-directed formats and materials as appropriate.

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