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Environmentalists, officials disagree on St. Johns dioxin

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Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - An environmental group said Monday it may put up signs warning of the dangers of fish containing dioxin along the Lower St. Johns River because government agencies don't think there's a problem with the cancer causing pollutant on the northeast Florida river.

Environmentalists have been urging state environmental and health officials for more than a year to warn sport fishermen about dangerous levels of dioxins contaminating fish in the St. Johns near Rice Creek, a tributary where a Georgia Pacific pulp and paper mill near Palatka discharges wastewater.

Environmental groups say studies have found female fish with signs of male anatomy in the river, indicating dioxin pollution.

Company officials and state regulators say the waste water the company puts into the creek is free of dioxin and tests of fish have shown a steady decline in the carcinogen to below the level thought to be harmful to people.

But a group called St. Johns Riverkeeper says the pollution is harmful and plans to post signs along the river showing a skull and crossed bones with the warning: "Some fish in this river contain cancer-causing dioxin."

"The people of northeast Florida will no longer wait for the federal or state government to protect the river," said Neil Armingeon, a spokesman for the group. "We will not stand by and let the St. Johns River become a dumping ground."

The group is also running radio ads in the Orlando area with a talking fish named Barbara Bass.

"We're turning into boy fish," she says. "I don't want to turn into Bob Bass. I want to stay Barbara Bass, the way nature intended."

Georgia Pacific, which is blamed by the environmentalists for the fish changes, says there's no scientific evidence linking the company's discharges to any fish abnormalities and that since the company stopped using chlorine in its bleaching process, it's wastewater has been free of dioxin.

Robert Burns, a Georgia Pacific spokesman, said the company has invested more than \$200 million in environmental improvements.

State Department of Environmental Protection spokesman Russell Schweiss said the company is in compliance with state rules and that the amount of dioxin found in fish in the area has been "going down."

State Department of Health toxicologist Dr. Joe Sekerke said his agency has also tested for elevated dioxin levels.

"We've looked at it and we don't think an advisory's needed," he said.