WHO EMRO | WHO and Ministry of Health and Environment investigate the mass death of fish in southern governorates of Iraq

Dead freshwater fish from the Euphrates river, Babil Governorate, November 2018. Baghdad, 20 November 2018 – Laboratory tests conducted on water samples at the reference laboratory in Amman, Jordan, to investigate the cause of the mass death of freshwater fish in the Euphrates river in Iraq, have revealed contamination of the water with a high content of coliform bacteria and heavy metals, and a high concentration of ammonia. Health experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health and Environment in Iraq say that while these materials are toxic to fish, they pose no threat to human health.

The testing of dead fish has revealed serious issues warranting WHO to conduct a second investigation related to a probable viral infection of fish causing the death of thousands in the river. Results of the second investigation are due next week.

The laboratory investigations have come in response to a request to WHO from the Ministry of Health and Environment to assess the likely effects of the death of the fish on humans and the environment.

As early as 2 November this year, thousands of tonnes of fish had died in the Euphrates river causing significant losses to fish farms and production in the southern part of Iraq, especially in
Babel province, 85 kilometres south of Baghdad.

A joint field mission of WHO and Ministry of Health and Environment experts visit Babil Governorate, south Baghdad, to assess the cause of the mass death of fish in the Euphrates river and to take samples for laboratory testing, November 2018. WHO continues to work with its Ministry of Health and Environment counterparts to develop appropriate preventive measures to effectively mitigate and respond to future incidents of this nature.

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