



CALIFORNIA FISH EATERS AT GREATER RISK

State jeopardizes public health by relaxing weekly consumption limits

Santa Monica, CA (June 27, 2008) -- Marking a significant decrease in public health protection, the state Office of Health Hazard Environmental Assessment today released a report that dramatically downplays the risks associated with consuming fish caught off the coast of California.

In a bid to get individuals to eat more fish as part of a healthier diet, OHHEA is now relaxing the weekly recommendation limits it had placed on the consumption of locally caught fish. Because of persistent pollution problems in California's oceans, harmful contaminants such as mercury and DDT have built up in the tissues of local species. People who regularly eat contaminated fish face significant health risks.

After 15 years of strong protection, the new report minimizes risks associated with sport fish consumption. The so-called Advisory Tissue Levels in the report provide diners with a recommended number of weekly fish-derived meals, based on contaminant concentration levels found in various species.

In one of the report's most troubling components, advisories that once protected consumers at an allowable cancer risk level of one in 100,000 people have now been increased to one in 10,000 people.

"It seems highly ironic, if not dangerous, that this report urges people to eat more fish, but fails to recognize that the fish they are consuming may be contaminated and potentially harmful to their health," said Mark Gold, president of Santa Monica-based environmental group Heal the Bay. "The risks to certain populations far outweigh any perceived health benefits."

As part of its mission to safeguard public health at local oceans, Heal the Bay has spent the past 20 years advocating for swimmable and fishable waters. Its outreach programs work closely with ethnic groups and subsistence anglers that are most at risk from overconsumption of contaminated fish.

The assumptions used to derive consumption levels in the report do not adequately reflect the typical preparation and consumption practices of at-risk populations. Asian communities, especially Pacific Islanders, consume significantly more fish than the amount used to derive acceptable risk in the report. Also, risk assumptions are based on filets, however many Asian cultures tend to consume fish whole.

Heal the Bay is also concerned that the faulty report will also be used as a precedent setting device in other environmental regulatory actions. State water quality boards could use the flawed contaminant values in the report to justify weakening standards in upcoming actions.

The state report can be viewed at <http://www.oehha.ca.gov/fish/gtlsx/crn062708.html>

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