

## Talking Points from the National Fisheries Institute about Eating Seafood and the FDA & EPA Revised Consumer Advisory on Methylmercury in Fish

March 18, 2004

- **Fish and shellfish remain an important part of a balanced diet, and people should continue to include fish in their diets.** While it's important to educate the at-risk population, the unintended consequence of this advisory, as shown in FDA focus groups, is that many people will reduce fish consumption even when they already eat less than the amount recommended in the advisory, or will avoid fish altogether. Some people will not feed their children fish. The American Heart Association, World Health Organization, National Academy of Science and other health authorities encourage regular fish consumption, and consumers should follow the advice of these medical experts.
- **Mercury levels in most fish sold to consumers are very low in mercury and levels in ocean fish have not changed in decades.** The FDA does not devote resources to sampling and testing most commercial species because the levels of mercury in most fish are far below levels of concern. A recent study published in *Environmental Science & Technology* shows that mercury levels in yellowfin tuna haven't changed in 27 years, leading the researchers to conclude that natural sources of mercury in the environment remain relatively constant.
- **This advisory, while well-intentioned, may harm public health if it results in consumer avoidance of fish.** Heart disease remains this country's number one killer, and each year, more than 250,000 people die of heart disease. The average person currently does not eat enough Omega-3 fatty acids from fish to meet AHA recommendations. Pregnant women who consume too little fish are three times more likely to have premature babies, and are more likely to suffer post-partum depression, according to studies published in the *British Journal of Medicine* in 2002.
- **FDA and EPA must ensure continued consumption of fish.** The advisory and the accompanying educational efforts of FDA and EPA must strongly encourage continued consumption of fish. The FDA should monitor the impacts of the advisory and ensure that it is not resulting in reduced fish consumption and other potentially harmful changes in dietary practices.
- **The advisory is conservative advice designed to keep sensitive consumers far below levels that may cause harm.** FDA and EPA should educate consumers that the advice is to protect pregnant mothers and the babies they carry. Other adults are less sensitive to methylmercury and can enjoy eating

even more fish. Mothers can eat fish with confidence by following the advisory and eating a variety of fish, because the advice includes a sizable margin of safety. Many developed countries, including Japan, Canada and New Zealand, have advisories that are less restrictive than that of the United States.

➤ **The inclusion of young children in this advisory is precautionary.**

Experts generally agree that the developing baby is most sensitive to methylmercury. The sensitivity to methylmercury decreases with age. There is no evidence to show that children in the U.S. are eating enough fish to present a risk. The 2002 CDC report on mercury body burden indicated that **none** of the children in the NHANES group were above EPA's very conservative safety level. FDA and EPA should educate mothers to keep fish as part of a healthy diet for their families, including children.