

WESTERN FISHBOAT OWNERS ASSOCIATION



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STATEMENT ON MERCURY IN ALBACORE TUNA

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For the past three years there has been an unending barrage of negative media coverage directed at mercury content in seafood. Initially the target species were tile fish, shark, swordfish, and mackerel. Shortly thereafter the second most consumed fish in the United States, tuna, was targeted. Unfortunately, there was no distinction made on levels in various sizes of albacore. Testing has shown smaller albacore caught by U.S. trollers based on the west coast have both lower mercury levels than their larger longline caught counterparts as well as higher oil (Omega-3) levels.

Extensive medical and nutritional research has shown that consumption of seafood, especially in oily fish such as albacore tuna, has fundamental health benefits for all age groups from the pre-natal (infant brain development) to the elderly (reduction in alzheimer's disease). Indeed, a diet deficient in seafood can lead to many physical and mental health problems. This is because oily fish is by far the best source of the particular long chain Omega-3 fatty acids shown to have unique benefits to the developing child. A leader in the widely respected journal *The Economist*, (19th Jan 2006) notes that- *"It now seems that an inadequate intake of them (omega-3's) by a pregnant woman puts her child at greater risk of being stupid, clumsy and friendless."*

Western Fishboat Owners Association representing the interests of a hook and line family-based U.S. fishery believes in the following:

- WFOA does not endorse any undocumented claims made by anyone or any group that suggests eating less albacore tuna may be better for your health.
- WFOA believes that seafood, and albacore specifically are very healthful choices in diet. Being high in protein, high in Omega-3's, and low in cost to the consumer, troll caught albacore seems like the obvious choice when compared to high cholesterol, hormone and antibiotic laden meats, processed foods, fast foods, and other foods high in trans-fats and other additives.
- WFOA believes that ALL tuna and tuna-like species are far better sources of nutrients than a vast number of food products on the market.
- WFOA recommends that Government Agencies, NGO's, Consumer Groups, and others recognize the importance of troll caught albacore as a very healthy choice for the consumer. WFOA encourages the debate focus on the overall human health and reasonable risk aversion and related factors in albacore, tuna, and all seafood consumption.

There are fair reports such as the one the Harvard School of Public health that recently concluded, *"A comparison of the risks and benefits of fish consumption suggests that government advisories warning women of childbearing age about mercury exposure should be issued with caution. The study warns that if advisories cause fish consumption in the general public to drop out of fear about the effects of mercury, substantial nutritional benefits could be lost. The study will appear as a series of five articles in the November issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine."* See - <<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/press/releases/press10192005.html>>

Since little has been reported comparing mercury levels in different sizes of albacore tuna fishermen and seafood labs took the initiative and did testing for two years. The surface-caught albacore predominately caught by the U.S., Japanese, Canadian, Spanish, and New Zealand fishermen are smaller 5kg - 10kg fish, which generally have lower levels than in the older, larger albacore caught in deep waters.

In 2003, Oregon State University Seafood Lab (OSU-SFL, funded by the Western Fishboat Owners Association and the Oregon Albacore Commission, conducted a study to determine mercury levels in 91 samples of North Pacific troll-caught albacore tuna harvested from May to November 2003. These tuna were found to have low total

mercury concentrations (ave. 0.14 ppm, range 0.027 – 0.26 ppm) in relation to levels previously reported by the FDA (ave. 0.35 ppm in canned albacore tuna and ave. 0.38 ppm in fresh/frozen unspecified tuna). The mercury levels in the North Pacific troll-caught albacore tuna were also very low compared to the 1.0 ppm methylmercury action level set by the FDA. The OSU-SFL mercury research was continued during the 2004 albacore troll-fishing season using a larger sample size. The methods and results for the 2004 study were very similar to the results in 2003.

From the OSU Report: "Recent warnings by the FDA and the EPA regarding mercury content in seafood have provoked negative public attention toward the albacore tuna market. The warnings were based on past studies that reported the mercury concentration in albacore tuna to be around 0.35 ppm. The North Pacific troll-caught albacore tuna tested for mercury in both the 2003 and the 2004 seasons were relatively low in mercury (0.14 ppm and 0.17 ppm, respectively) and were well below the FDA action level of 1.0 ppm. The lower levels of mercury in the North Pacific troll-caught albacore may be due, in part, to their smaller size in comparison with albacore used in the national canning industry. Albacore tuna caught and landed on the west coast of the U.S. has been shown to have very low levels of mercury compared to Asian Longline and albacore caught in most of the world." NOTE: Copies of the reports can be obtained from WFOA or OSU on upon request. ¹

Some groups in California encouraged the Attorney General under Proposition 65 to go after sellers of fresh and fresh frozen swordfish and yellowfin tuna (Ahi). Many of these special interests are exploiting the fears of pregnant women and mothers for their own purposes, and our fleet has been caught in the crossfire. Nonetheless, because of the many agendas involved, the campaigns targeting albacore are not going to stop any time soon. This legal action is ongoing against major retail grocery chains.

Groups involved in these campaigns include: ²

Consumers Union	Natural Resources Defense Council
Center for Science in the Public Interest	Oceana
Earth Share and the Ad Council	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
Environmental Defense	Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Environmental Working Group	Physicians for Social Responsibility
Friends of the Earth	SeaWeb
Greenpeace	Sierra Club
Mercury Policy Project	Turtle Island Restoration Network
National Environmental Trust	Water Keeper Alliance

While not all of the above are extreme, a few in the forefront of the mercury campaign are using much misdirection and hyperbole in their announcements. It is very important to understand that there are many agendas behind the current mercury-in-albacore claims and campaigns. Some of the groups involved are animal rights organizations, and they openly admit that they are using this issue in their efforts to eliminate the longline gear types in an effort to save turtles. Some environmental groups are using this issue in attempts to force legislation on greenhouse gas emissions. Their strategy is to claim that mercury from coal burning power plants has already contaminated the food supply (they're using albacore and other fish as "proof"), thus implying that if various states and the Federal government fail to pass new air quality laws soon then "tens of thousands of babies could end up brain damaged." Still other groups comprise bounty hunters who want to go after private companies that sell "high-mercury seafood," threaten to sue them, and then collect cash settlements under California's Proposition 65.

WFOA continues to support the consumption of seafood as very healthy and will continue to strive to educate the consumer on these issues. Our only agenda is to move it from the ocean to the table in an efficient cost-effective and environmentally friendly manner.

NOTE: Western Fishboat Owners Association, is a California-based Non-Profit association which represents approximately 400 albacore tuna troll-vessels owners based in California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Hawaii, New Zealand, and British Columbia. These are family owned boats that fish for albacore tuna during summer and fall. About 80% of the vessels also fish in other winter and spring fisheries and supply processors and consumers with Salmon, Crab, Blackcod, Swordfish, Shrimp, and other species.

¹ Report- Mercury Content in North Pacific Troll-Caught Albacore Tuna (Thunnus alalunga) from the 2004 Season Prepared by: Michael T. Morrissey, Director, Rosalee S. Rasmussen, Graduate Student, OSU Seafood Laboratory, 2001 Marine Dr., Rm 253, Astoria, OR 97103, e-mail: michael.morrissey@orst.edu

² From <<http://www.fishscam.com/>>

