

Fishing for Answers

By Jennifer Weeks

Eating seafood is healthy (unless it's contaminated with toxic chemicals) and eco-friendly (except for fish from depleted ocean stocks or high-polluting fish farms). Retailers can help consumers sort through the mixed messages and make smart choices.

Shoppers have reason to stop and think at the fish counter. The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the American Heart Association recommend eating seafood, which is low in saturated fat and contains omega-3 fatty acids that reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. But the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency warn that some fish contain dangerous levels of PCBs and mercury.

Along with health concerns, shoppers often choose seafood to mitigate environmental impacts of meat production, such as air and water pollution from large livestock farms. However, fishing also affects the environment. Many fisheries have been depleted by over-harvesting, while aquaculture generates organic wastes and can spread diseases to wild fish populations.

"I often challenge people to come up with a more complex food category than seafood," says Henry Lovejoy, president of EcoFish, a New Hampshire company that distributes seafood from certified sustainable fisheries to restaurants and retailers nationwide.

Seafood consumption is trending upward. In 2003, Americans consumed 16.3 pounds of seafood per capita, including 11.4 pounds of fresh and frozen seafood, 4.6 pounds of canned seafood, and 0.3 pounds of cured products. The most popular types (in descending order) were shrimp, canned tuna, salmon, pollock, catfish, cod, crab, tilapia, clams, and scallops.

Concerns about where seafood comes from and what's in it are driving disclosure requirements for sellers. Federal law requires



Photo credit: Marine Stewardship Council

Alaska Salmon is one of the first fisheries to seek re-assessment after earning the MSC logo five years ago.

retailers to label fresh and frozen seafood (but not canned or processed products) with its country of origin and whether it was wild-caught or farm-raised. To support label claims, retailers and suppliers must maintain chain of custody information, which can be audited by USDA.

Some retailers display warnings based on the current FDA/EPA advisory on mercury in fish and shellfish. Because exposure to methylmercury can cause developmental damage, the directive tells pregnant women or those who might become pregnant, nursing mothers, and young children to avoid eating shark, swordfish, king mackerel, or tilefish (large predatory species that bioaccumulate high levels of mercury).

It recommends that they eat up to 12 ounces per week of seafood lower in mercury, including shrimp, salmon, canned light tuna, pollock, and catfish, or 6 ounces of albacore tuna, which contains more mercury than light tuna.

There is no federal requirement to display this advice, but California invoked its Proposition 65 law — which requires businesses to warn customers about substances known to cause cancer and birth defects — in a 2003 lawsuit that forced retailers including Safeway and Albertson's to provide warnings about mercury in seafood. Advocacy groups are urging grocers to post warnings nationwide, and some stores do so. For example, Shaw's supermarkets in the Northeast (owned by Albertson's) provide take-away flyers with information about mercury on their seafood cases.

In September 2005, the non-profit organizations Oceana and the Mercury Policy Project released a report that detailed mercury testing on store-bought swordfish and tuna purchased at outlets including Shaw's, Whole Foods, Kroger, Albertson's, Safeway, and

Carrs stores in 22 states. The groups found average mercury concentrations in swordfish of 1.11 parts per million (ppm), above FDA's "action level" of 1.0 ppm, and 0.33 ppm in fresh and frozen tuna, equal to levels in canned albacore tuna.

Based on these findings, the groups called for state and federal warnings wherever fish covered by government advisories are sold, plus store information where government advisories are not required, and stepped-up FDA testing for mercury. The campaign's central message is that federal warnings do not reach all consumers, and the FDA does not do enough sampling or keep fish with high levels of mercury off the market, so retailers should provide fair warning to consumers about mercury risks in seafood.

In October 2005, Safeway and Albertson's stores nationwide began displaying information on placards and fact sheets on their seafood counters about mercury contamination in shark, swordfish, tilefish, and king mackerel. Spokespersons for the chains said that the decision was voluntary, and an Albertson's representative said that sales had not changed in response.

Wild Oats Natural Marketplace stores have posted mercury warnings in their seafood cases, with recommended lower-mercury selections, since May 2003. "Our customers have responded very positively and the signs have not negatively impacted our seafood sales," says Wild Oats national seafood buyer Marc Okeon. "In fact, customers tend to buy more seafood from us because they trust us to keep them informed." Oceana has honored Wild Oats as an "Ocean Hero" for going beyond standard practice at most grocery stores and posting mercury warnings nationwide.

Some experts think federal mercury guide-

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lines don't go far enough. "We're not satisfied," says Jean Halloran, director of food policy initiatives for Consumers Union, who helped develop the current mercury advisory. "FDA doesn't enforce the recommended mercury content levels, and the tuna standard doesn't make it sufficiently clear that albacore contains two to three times as much mercury as light tuna. There should be more effort to promote low-mercury fish choices. And warnings should be targeted to affluent male and female consumers who eat large quantities of seafood, because eating frequently from medium- and high-mercury categories is risky."

To help consumers make choices, several organizations publish pocket guides that categorize seafood based on health and environmental criteria. Retailers can use these guides to advise customers. Other useful steps include charting origins and catch methods for currently-stocked seafood products, double-checking invoice information from suppliers, and educating employees about health and sustainability issues associated with eating seafood.

Canned tuna is a focus of current labeling debates. In a 2003 study by the Mercury Policy Project, three out of 48 cans of randomly sampled albacore tuna contained

more mercury than the FDA's action level of 1.0 part per million, and the average mercury content per can of albacore was 0.506 parts per million – levels that would put pregnant women and young children over EPA's reference dose levels if they consumed the amounts of albacore allowed under current guidelines.

The American Medical Association supports requiring mercury warnings on canned tuna, and California attorney general Bill Lockyer has sued the three largest U.S. tuna companies under Proposition 65 for failing to provide mercury warnings. The tuna industry counters that FDA/EPA warning standards provide ample safety margins.

Commercial seafood products can carry many endorsements: for example, tuna labeled "dolphin-safe" is caught by methods that avoid netting nearby dolphins. Wild Oats labels most food in its seafood cases "All Natural," to indicate that it does not contain preservatives, artificial flavors or coloring, or chemical dips.

The most widely-accepted environmental certification for seafood products is endorsement from the Marine Stewardship Council, a joint venture between Unilever and the World Wildlife Fund. MSC-certified products are caught using methods that do

not deplete fisheries or degrade the surrounding environment. The Council does not address handling beyond the point at which fish are landed, but notes that other standards such as ISO-14000 could be applied to document and rate how fish are handled after landing.

EcoFish, which has been certified by MSC as a sustainable seafood distributor, provides information on its packages about product quality, origin, and relevant health issues. "It's a service to the business owner because they don't have to have all of the answers right at hand when people ask about issues they're read about in the media," says EcoFish owner Lovejoy. Ecofish products, most of which are quick-frozen within hours of being landed, are carried by retailers including Wild Oats, Earth Fare in the mid-Atlantic, and Chamberlain's in Florida.

In February 2005 Lovejoy launched the Seafood Safe program, which tests fish for mercury and PCBs in independent laboratories. Seafood Safe labels indicate how many portions of the product are safe to eat per month. "You actually need a spreadsheet to do the calculations about safe consumption, and we've done that for consumers," says Lovejoy. All EcoFish products carry Seafood Safe labeling, and it will also be available to other companies as of late 2006.

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