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## **NATIONAL STUDY FINDS HIGH MERCURY LEVELS IN STORE-BOUGHT TUNA AND SWORDFISH**

### **Coalition Recommends Supermarket Warning Signs, Regular Testing of Certain Commercial Fish to Protect Public Health**

**Anchorage, AK** - Oceana and Alaska Community Action on Toxics today released the results of a major 22-state mercury testing project which included samples of swordfish taken from Carrs in Anchorage, Alaska. The national project, led by Oceana and the Mercury Policy Project, confirmed that store-bought swordfish and tuna contain levels of mercury that the federal government has determined may be hazardous to human health, particularly children.

The analysis was more comprehensive than any recently performed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and included samples purchased at popular supermarket chains such as Safeway, Shaw's, Albertsons and Whole Foods. Swordfish and tuna samples bought in Alaska and 21 other states were tested at the University of North Carolina's Environmental Quality Institute between July 7 and August 11.

"Families have a right to know there could be dangerous levels of mercury in certain fish they are buying at the supermarket, and grocers have a responsibility to tell them," said Jim Ayers, Oceana's Pacific Region Director. "Consumers should be allowed to make informed choices, and labels at seafood counters and canned tuna shelves would give them that option. An obscure posting on an FDA website is not sufficient."

An average mercury concentration of 1.1 parts per million (ppm) was found in the swordfish tested. That level exceeds the FDA Action Level for commercial fish, which is the limit at which the agency can take legal action to remove a product from the market. Two samples, including one from Maine and one from Rhode Island, contained over 2 ppm, twice the FDA Action Level. The testing results also suggest that a random shopper buying swordfish in a grocery store has a 50 percent chance of buying a swordfish steak with mercury levels considered unsafe by the FDA. Three swordfish samples collected by Alaska Community Action on Toxics at Carrs in Anchorage were found to contain mercury concentrations of 0.903, 0.668, and 0.503 ppm.

The groups reported that mercury concentrations in samples of fresh or frozen tuna steaks averaged 0.33 ppm, a level comparable to that of canned albacore tuna, a fish specifically targeted for limited consumption by women of childbearing age and children in the 2004 joint advisory from the FDA and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Buried in the second page of the same advisory is similar consumption advice for tuna steaks.

"This study should serve as a wake-up call for anyone who routinely eats swordfish or tuna, as well as for the supermarkets who sell it," said Pam Miller of Alaska Community Action on Toxics. "Government warnings tell us that children are particularly at risk. It's kind of like lead poisoning in the 1970s. How many children have to be poisoned before we do something?"

Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin that has been linked to learning disabilities and developmental delays in children, as well as damage to the heart, nervous system and kidneys in adults. Chlorine plants, power plants, mining operations, and medical waste incineration are the primary sources of mercury in our environment. There are eight chlorine plants that refuse to switch to non-mercury

technology that others are using. The Bush Administration has refused to require power plants to limit mercury emissions that are hazardous to human health and the environment.

“Eliminating mercury from chlorine processing in particular is a no-brainer,” said Ayers. “It is irresponsible for these companies to keep poisoning our children.”

Based on the national test results a 44-pound child eating six ounces of tuna weekly would be four times over the EPA's reference dose, and a 120-pound woman eating just six ounces of tuna weekly would be eating one and one-half times EPA's reference dose. The EPA reference dose is an estimation of the amount of mercury that, if consumed, would not be expected to cause an appreciable risk of adverse health effects over a lifetime.

Forty-five states have issued advisories warning sensitive populations about the dangers of eating mercury-contaminated fish, and in 2004, the FDA and the EPA advised women of childbearing age and young children to avoid shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish, and to limit consumption of canned albacore tuna and fresh tuna to 6 oz. per week.

To protect and inform the public about the risks of mercury poisoning, the coalition produced these recommendations:

- State and federal governments should require warnings to be posted where fish covered by government advisories are sold.
- In the absence of federal and state requirements, grocery stores should post signs to communicate mercury advisories.
- The FDA should regularly test commercial fish for mercury content.
- The FDA should not interfere with states' efforts to educate citizens about mercury in seafood.

The Fair Warning project analyzed and reported on six times more swordfish than the FDA has in the past five years combined, and eight times more tuna steaks than the FDA has in the past eight years, according to the FDA's database.

Fish for the Fair Warning project were collected from: Alaska, California, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Vermont and Wisconsin. The fish were bought in major grocery stores, including Shaw's, Whole Foods, Albertsons, Sav-a-Center, Winn-Dixie, Dominick's, Kroger, Trader Joe's, Genuardi's, Safeway and Carrs.

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