

## Mercury in fish

### Hold the sushi

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#### A pollution trail from the streams to the ocean

HERBERT HOOVER once described fishing as a “discipline in equality—for all men are equal before fish”. The converse, unfortunately, is not true. After the release of a new government study that documents the prevalence of mercury in freshwater fish, American consumers are aware that all fish are not equal, or at least not equally good to consume.

The new study was conducted by the US Geological Survey (USGS), a scientific agency run by the government. It found traces of methylmercury, a form of mercury that is readily absorbed, in every fish sampled in 291 streams across the country. In around a quarter of those fish, the amount of mercury was above the level set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as safe for human consumption. Mercury levels at more than two-thirds of the sites exceeded what scientists believe fish-eating mammals, such as mink and otters, should ingest.

The leading source of mercury is pollution from coal-burning power plants, which accounts for 40% of all domestic anthropogenic mercury, according to the EPA. It is emitted through smokestacks and deposited in rain and snow, often making its way into the water. Mercury can be toxic, and adult exposure to it can lead to reproductive problems, memory loss and tremors. Prenatal and infant exposure can cause mental retardation, deafness and blindness. The National Research Council, an organisation that looks at science and public policy, estimates that more than 60,000 children are born each year at risk of learning disabilities because they have been exposed to methylmercury in the womb.

The fish lobby points out that the USGS findings do not necessarily damn the commercial fish industry, as most of the fish people eat comes from the ocean and not from freshwater streams. But mercury levels are high in marine fish, too—particularly in larger species, such as shark, tuna and swordfish. Mercury accumulates as it works its way up the food chain. A report released earlier this year by Harvard and the USGS forecasts that mercury levels in the Pacific Ocean will rise by 50% by 2050 as emissions from coal-fired power plants increase.

Consumers are now trying to understand how the USGS study's findings should influence their eating habits. One popular national news programme displayed slices of raw fish on air and asked a health expert go through which ones were safe to consume. This shows the need for clearer guidance from the EPA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on fish consumption by pregnant women, says Richard Wiles of the Environmental Working Group, which keeps an eye on toxins in food. He says the FDA has “historically been in the pocket of the tuna industry”, and has failed to give specific directives about how to get the health benefits of fish while avoiding mercury.

The news about mercury also underscores the importance of developing a federal policy to control emissions. The Bush administration's proposed cap-and-trade policy, which would have allowed heavily polluting factories to buy emission rights from cleaner ones, was struck down in court last year. That leaves Barack Obama responsible for suggesting a more aggressive curb on mercury emissions—for the good of America's fish and those who eat them.