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Contact: Cindy Karra
202-974-5009

Congressional Review Finds Conclusive Evidence That No American Is at Risk from Trace Amounts of Mercury in Fish

New Report Concludes That Mercury Issue Concerns Politics, Not Science

Washington, DC; February 16, 2005 -- The U.S. Tuna Foundation (USTF) today applauded the findings of a comprehensive report released today by Resources Committee Chairman Richard W. Pombo (R-CA) and Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Chairman Jim Gibbons (R-NV) of the U.S. House of Representatives affirming that the health benefits of consuming seafood far outweigh any risk due to the trace amounts of mercury in some fish.

The report -- *Mercury in Perspective: Fact and Fiction About the Debate Over Mercury* -- is the product of a lengthy Congressional review of the mercury issue dating back to 1990. Based on all available science, the report concludes that there is no basis for the claim by environmental activists that unborn children can be at risk if their mothers eat fish during pregnancy.

In contrast, the report states that every scientific study has found that no one in the U.S. has anywhere near the amount of mercury in their system from eating seafood known to cause a health problem. This is supported by a large study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which found all of the women and children studied were significantly below any known adverse effect level (confirming no one is at risk). At the same time, the report states that the amount of mercury in the most commonly consumed seafood, such as canned tuna, is well below the trace amounts allowed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and "far removed from any level of concern."

Of equal significance, the report describes as "disingenuous" allegations of "mercury poisonings" in the U.S. population, concluding that mercury levels in fish have not increased in over 25 years. Specifically, the report cites a Princeton University study, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which found that methylmercury levels in Yellowfin tuna caught off Hawaii in 1998 measured the same as in 1971.

"The findings of this report are essential so that policy makers and the public can separate fact from hype when it comes to mercury levels in fish," said David Burney, Executive Director of the U.S. Tuna Foundation (USTF). "Americans need to know that fish is a safe

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and very healthy food and that the amount of mercury in canned tuna and most other types of commonly eaten seafood is far below any level of concern. That is what the report by Resources Committee Chairman Richard W. Pombo and Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Chairman Jim Gibbons makes plain, which is why I hope its findings will be communicated widely.”

In terms of how mercury levels are regulated in seafood, the Congressional report concludes that the EPA’s standard -- called the “Reference Dose” -- is “the most restrictive in the world” because it builds in a 10-fold safety factor to the lowest exposure level ever seen to have even a subtle noticeable impact on the neurological development of young children. Moreover, the report questions whether the reference dose has kept Americans from reaping the same health and nutritional benefits from eating fish as people from other nations. In contrast, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Kingdom’s Food Standards Agency (FSA) use the Provisional Tolerable Weekly Intake (PTWI), which at 3.3 micrograms of methylmercury per kilogram of body weight a week (ug/kg bw/week) is much higher than the 0.7 ug/kg bw/week, applied by EPA.

Based on its extensive review of the debate, the Congressional report calls for an end to the “politization” of the mercury issue because “scaring people away from consuming fish is creating a public health crisis in its own right.” According to the report, fears about mercury have led to a decline in domestic fish consumption, especially among pregnant women and young children who need the omega-3 fatty acids in fish during pregnancy and the first two years of a baby’s life. This includes the fatty acid DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), which makes up approximately 40 percent of the polyunsaturated fatty acid content in the cell membranes in the brain and is transferred from mother to the fetus at a high rate during the last trimester of pregnancy. Along with DHA, the developing fetus uses another omega-3 fatty acid, EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid), for the growth of the brain and the developing nervous system.

“It is important for pregnant and nursing women to understand that the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish are essential during pregnancy and lactation,” said Joyce Nettleton, D.Sc., R.D., author of *Omega-3 Fatty Acids and Health* and a member of the Tuna Nutrition Council, which advises USTF on nutrition and public health matters.” Women need to know that eating canned tuna and many other types of fish during pregnancy provides the omega-3 fatty acids that are necessary for the brain of the fetus to develop and thrive.”

Beyond pregnant women and young children, the Congressional report concludes that the omega-3 fatty acids found in canned tuna and other types of fish lowers the risk of heart disease, reduces the likelihood of blood clots and stroke, protects against certain cancers, has a therapeutic effect on autoimmune diseases, and helps to relieve depression. That is why the government and public health groups are advising people to eat more fish, not less. This includes the specific recommendation contained in the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans that consumers eat two eight-ounce servings a week of fish, and especially fatty fish like canned tuna that is high in omega-3 fatty acids.

More information about canned tuna and its health benefits is available at the USTF Web site, www.tunafacts.com.

Established in 1976, the US Tuna Foundation (USTF) is the national organization representing the canned tuna processors and the fishermen who supply them and addresses issues ranging from fishing access arrangements to federal and state regulations and domestic marketing.

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