



APR 6 2001

A. Dennis McBride, M.D., M.P.H.
North Carolina Department of
Health and Human Services
2001 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, North Carolina 27699

Dear Dr. McBride:

On behalf of Dr. Bernard Schwetz, the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Acting Principal Deputy Commissioner, and Dr. Elizabeth Southerland, Director of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Standards and Health Protection Division, I thank you for your letter of February 7, 2001, regarding the recent federal advisories on methylmercury in fish.

In developing our respective methylmercury messages, FDA and EPA considered, among other factors, information gathered from focus group studies on how consumers interpret various messages; data on the levels of methylmercury in a variety of species of fish; and the extent of data available on the effects of methylmercury on certain populations. (See enclosed advisories, rationale and data tables.)

The population to which FDA's advice is primarily directed is women who are or may become pregnant because of the danger to the developing nervous system of the unborn child. FDA extended the recommendation to avoid the four highest-mercury fish species to nursing women and young children as a matter of prudence.

While both FDA's and EPA's advisories are aimed at informing affected populations about possible risks from methylmercury in fish, the respective advisories apply to fish from different sources. Specifically, FDA's advisory applies to commercial fish from stores or restaurants, whereas EPA's advice covers freshwater fish caught by noncommercial fishers from local waters.

The two advisories' recommended meal sizes differ based on these different types of fish covered. Because ocean and coastal fish tend to have consistently and significantly lower methylmercury levels than freshwater fish, according to fish tissue data available to FDA and EPA, it was determined that about twice as much ocean and coastal fish can be safely consumed compared with freshwater fish.

The agencies believe that the two national advisories are complementary and provide adequate protection for all consumers of fish, including fish caught by recreational and subsistence fishers. It is important to note that both advisories recommend that people contact their local or state health departments to determine if the state has more specific advice based on data on fish caught in local waters. Considering your example, North Carolina's advice on king mackerel should prevail.

Reaching pregnant women and women of childbearing age with the information in the advisories is the important next step for both FDA and EPA. Both agencies are planning comprehensive educational campaigns to reach these targeted groups, directly with a consumer brochure, through women's doctors, and in partnership with women's health and professional associations.

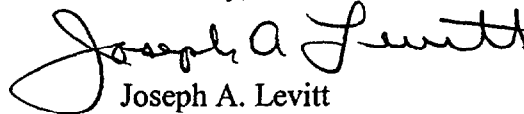
FDA is contacting newspapers, magazines and other popular media, especially those read by pregnant women, to interest those outlets in featuring the methylmercury advisory's safety message. The agency has worked, too, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Women, Infants, and Children program and Food Safety and Inspection Service to distribute the information.

EPA is cosponsoring a "National Risk Communication" conference that will focus on the issue of communicating information about pollutants in sport fish, and will work with state and tribal programs in developing their advisory materials.

FDA and EPA appreciate your willingness to help us inform the public about these important advisories, and plan to take advantage of any such opportunities to cooperate with states and other partners toward that mutual public health goal.

Thank you again for sharing your perspective regarding the advisories and particular issues of concern.

Sincerely,



Joseph A. Levitt
Director
Center for Food Safety
and Applied Nutrition

Enclosures

FDA Consumer Advisory
FDA Rationale
Tables of Methylmercury Levels in Commercial Fish Species
EPA Consumer Advisory