



EPA scientists blast FDA advice on fish

Experts insist mercury warnings for women, kids 'inadequate'

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In the waning days of the Bush presidency, the Food and Drug Administration is pushing to scuttle the government's advice about mercury-contaminated seafood, a dramatic policy change that would, in effect, encourage women and children to eat more fish despite growing concerns about the toxic metal.

The FDA's recommendations, sent recently to the White House Office of Management and Budget for approval, prompted a sharp rebuke from scientists at the Environmental Protection Agency who, in memos circulated earlier this month, described them as "scientifically flawed and inadequate."

A joint advisory issued by the two agencies in 2004 cautions women of childbearing age, nursing mothers and young children to limit seafood consumption to 12 ounces a week. But in a draft version of the FDA's new report, the agency says its own modeling shows that kids can benefit from eating fish.

The FDA argues that nutrients in fish offset the

risks posed by mercury and could boost a child's IQ by three points. Its conclusion is similar to claims by the seafood industry.

EPA scientists, though, say the FDA's report reaches conclusions that aren't supported by the studies it cites, and at various points either trivializes or overstates existing research.

Moreover, the EPA scientists say, the FDA fails to consider that some species of fish tend to have much higher mercury levels than others. The EPA's comments reflect long-standing criticism that the government isn't giving Americans enough advice about which types of seafood are safest to eat.

Before Bush leaves office

The FDA's proposal is among a series of controversial policy changes moving quickly as the Bush administration prepares to leave office. Seafood industry lobbyists want to scale back the government's mercury warning, which they contend is depressing sales and scaring women away from eating fish.

In contrast, President-elect Barack Obama and leaders of the Democratic-controlled Congress have pledged to enforce tougher mercury policies.

"Once again, the Bush administration seems intent on ignoring sound science on mercury poisoning," Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said. "This backroom bouquet for special interests should be stopped in its tracks."

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The Environmental Working Group, an advocacy organization that obtained the FDA report, sent a letter to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson urging him to fight the proposal.

In an e-mail response to questions, the FDA said a final decision had not been reached. "The FDA will make no final determination until all the relevant comments and scientific analysis has been carefully considered," the agency wrote.

Choosing low-mercury fish

Studies have shown that exposure to mercury in the womb, mostly from fish eaten by mothers, can irreversibly damage the brain before birth, causing subtle delays in walking and talking as well as decreased attention span and memory. Some research suggests that mercury also could increase the risk of heart disease in adults.

A recent study found that the percentage of women with high mercury levels declined from 2000 to 2004, even though those women were eating the same amount of seafood. The study's authors said their finding suggests that consumer advisories are prompting women to eat fish low in mercury.

Sniping between the FDA and EPA is nothing new. The two agencies have fought for years about how to caution women and children about mercury.

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