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Contact: Michael Bender, Mercury Policy Project, 802-223-9000

## **Canned Tuna Mercury Riskier Than Previously Suspected *Pregnant Women, Young Children Warned to Avoid Albacore***

Montpelier, VT — One of every 20 cans of "white," or albacore, tuna should be recalled as unsafe for human consumption, according to independent testing conducted for the Mercury Policy Project, a public interest group. On average, the levels of mercury in the white tuna were considerably higher than the industry and government claims from outdated FDA tests, said Michael Bender, director of the project.

"Our tests confirm what FDA has known for over a decade; white tuna has higher mercury levels," said Bender. "Yet because FDA halted testing of canned tuna for mercury in 1998 to save money and because industry keeps its results secret, parents are unknowingly exposing their children to mercury."

Methylmercury— the organic form mercury assumes in fish— is a potent neurotoxin that poses the greatest risk to the developing fetus, infants, and young children. Data from the CDC indicates that one in 12 women of childbearing age have unsafe mercury levels, translating to over 300,000 babies born at risk each year.

"Our sample size was admittedly small," said Bender. "We chose 60 cans of tuna randomly off grocery shelves, had them tested by the New Age/Landmark Laboratory, Inc. and then had a portion retested by The National Food Laboratory, Inc.—a lab used by the tuna industry—so there is no reason to be believe that these results are not reflective of what millions of Americans consume."

Canned tuna is consumed in 90 percent of American households and accounts for around 20 percent of US seafood consumption. Children eat more than twice as much tuna as any other fish, and canned tuna is the most frequently consumed fish among women of child bearing age. Albacore accounts for about one-third of all canned tuna sold in the U.S. and our independent testing found that mercury levels in white canned tuna averaged over 0.5 ppm.

"FDA's own food safety committee recommended last year that the Agency warn pregnant women about canned tuna, but the Agency has failed to act because of undue influence by industry," said Bender. "FDA should stop protecting the fishing industry's profits and start protecting children from mercury."

How much fish a person can eat before exceeding the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) "virtual safe limit," called a reference dose (RfD), depends on body weight and mercury content of the fish. For example:

- A 22 pound toddler eating only 2 ounces of tuna per week with a 0.5 ppm mercury concentration would have an intake over **4 times** the EPA's RfD.
- If a woman with a typical weight of 132 lbs eats 12 ounces of canned tuna per week (the limit advised by FDA) with a 0.5 ppm mercury concentration, she will exceed by **4 times** the EPA's RfD.
- An 88 pound child consuming one 6 ounce can of tuna with a 0.5 ppm mercury concentration weekly would be exposed to **3 times** the EPA's RfD standard.

These concerns, however, pale in comparison to the risks of prenatal mercury exposure; in utero fetuses are at risk of neurological impairment from methylmercury passing through the placental barrier. Nevertheless, at their food safety committee meeting last year, FDA scientists admitted that as many as 50 percent of women in the U.S. have little or no knowledge of mercury exposure risks identified with eating fish.

Cans of Starkist, Bumblebee, and Chicken of the Sea tuna and others were collected from Safeway, Shaw's, and other supermarkets around the country and sent to New Age/Landmark Laboratory in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Then 20 percent of the white tuna samples were retested by The National Food Laboratory, Inc. in Dublin, California. Over six percent of the white tuna samples contained mercury at or above FDA's outdated and unprotective action level for mercury of 1 part-per-million. On average, the 48 white tuna samples proved to have levels of mercury over four-times higher than the 12 light tuna cans tested.

According to a tuna industry spokesperson, "extensive research" found that four percent of the tuna tested exceeded the FDA's action level of 1 ppm. A \$1 billion per year industry, the U.S. tuna industry estimates that warning women about the risks of mercury exposure in canned tuna could lead to over a 20 percent drop in sales. After meeting with the tuna industry, FDA dropped canned tuna from its consumer advisory.

In the face of such FDA inaction, states and others are attempting to fill the void by embracing approaches that are more restrictive than the FDA's action level. Eleven states have issued advisories warning pregnant women, nursing mothers, women of childbearing age and children to limit canned tuna consumption. Several states also warn that the "white" canned tuna contains higher mercury levels than "light" tuna.

Most mercury pollution comes from the burning of fossil fuels in the coal-fired power plants, disposal of mercury-containing products in incinerators and landfills, mineral mining operations, industrial uses like chlorine production, and releases from dental offices. Mercury levels in the environment have increased 3-5 fold in the past century as a result of human activities and are reaching threshold levels that threaten human health and environmental security, as well as the future of the global fishing industry. Since 1996, fish has surpassed beef and poultry as the main common source of protein for billions of people in the world.

In February 2003, the UN Governing Council found that there was sufficient adverse impacts of global mercury pollution to warrant international action.

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Editor's note: There is some ambiguity as to exactly what legal action is triggered by violation of the FDA "action level" for mercury of 1 part per million. In 1977, FDA described an action level as a level of an added poisonous or deleterious substance "established to define the level of contamination at which food will be deemed adulterated" and as a level "which may prohibit any detectable amount of substance in food." Under pressure from the commercial fishing industry, FDA later amended that description of an action level's effect, saying that that it was the amount of adulteration at which a food may be regarded as adulterated. It was during this same period that FDA relaxed the original mercury action level of 0.5 parts per million, doubling it to 1.0 ppm on the grounds that people were eating less fish than it had originally believed. This decision followed the National Marine Fisheries Service's conclusion that "[t]he higher level would provide a significant economic benefit to those industries most seriously affected by regulatory actions under the 0.5 ppm guideline." Consumption data was reportedly supplied by industry. The agency also established a standard that is consciously protective only of the general population (e.g. adults), not specific sensitive subgroups most at risk, such as the developing fetus, infants and young children.