

For Immediate Release

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Can the Mercury Poisoning the Poor: Tuna Industry Subsidies Should Stop, say Advocates

Washington, DC—In light of new testing by Defenders of Wildlife showing higher-than-expected levels of mercury in canned light tuna, advocates are urging US agencies to take more precautionary measures to protect low income and vulnerable Americans from exposure to mercury.

“The US Government should stop subsidizing the tuna industry at the expense of exposing America’s poorest and most vulnerable to mercury, a known neurotoxin,” said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. “Like in Hawaii, we recommend that other animal protein substitutes be offered in Federal low income food assistance programs.”

In 2005, the US Government purchased nearly 10 million pounds of tuna from the fishing industry at a cost of over \$16 million dollars. (For more detailed information, see web-link at end of press release.) Federal programs that purchase and distribute tuna include:

- Nutrition Services Incentive Program;
- Child Nutrition Programs (primarily the National School Lunch Program);
- Emergency Food Assistance Program,
- Food Distribution on Indian Reservations; and
- Pacific Island Assistance.

“According to the US Department of Agriculture, canned tuna is the fish most consumed by pregnant women and children—hence it is probably their largest exposure to mercury,” said Bender. “Yet USDA’s Women, Infant and Children program (WIC) provides over 8 million low-income women and children with 26 ounces of tuna per family per month, based on Food & Drug Administration advice which mistakenly assumes that all light tuna has low mercury levels.”

Bender said that at least one state WIC program, Hawaii, has convinced USDA to allow canned salmon, a low mercury substitute, to be offered along with canned tuna. Yet other states can only provide canned tuna since it is the only animal protein source allowed under the Federal WIC program.

Testing done by Defenders of Wildlife concluded that tuna imported from many Latin American countries, including several samples from Ecuador, had significantly higher mercury concentrations than the FDA had previously attributed to light tuna. More importantly, testing found that the average mercury content in the imported light canned tuna sampled was more than twice the

average for light tuna that the FDA found in their test samples and well above their cutoff for “low-mercury” fish.

The entire report and advice on how to protect your family from high levels of mercury exposure from consumption of light canned tuna can be found at:
<http://www.defenders.org/tunamercury/>.

Information obtained from a US Congressional Office on Federal “Tuna Purchases, All Commodity Programs, FYs 2004-2005” can be viewed at:
<http://www.mercurypolicy.org/new/documents/TunaPurchasesByProgramFYs20042005.pdf>

For additional information, see:

<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/06/22/tuna/print.html>

<http://www.mercurypolicy.org/new/documents/CanTheTuna061903.pdf>

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