

# Eureka Times-Standard

## Study show West Coast tuna off the mercury hook

By John Driscoll the Times-Standard

**Saturday, February 21, 2004** – Results of an ongoing Oregon State University study suggest West Coast tuna has much less mercury in it than the run-of-the-mill solid-white canned product on most supermarket shelves.

Researchers from the university's Seafood Laboratory last year took samples from 91 albacore tuna caught off the West Coast of the United States and Canada. They found that on average, the locally caught fish contained about a third of the mercury in solid white tuna sold in cans.

That could mean good news for the West Coast fishery, a group of small to medium-sized businesses that ply the waters about 20 to 100 miles offshore.

Despite distinct differences, the West Coast fishery took a hit along with the rest of the industry when studies of fish-eating San Francisco Bay area residents showed high levels of mercury, a toxin that in large amounts can harm the brain and central nervous system.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration had previously averaged all canned tuna, and arrived at a figure that it said poses no significant threat. But it lumped solid white tuna – generally from big tuna caught at deep depths – and skipjack tuna, a much smaller fish.

Late last year, the FDA released new information that showed white tuna had a higher mercury content than skipjack, which is sold as light tuna.

The OSU study found that West Coast albacore only contains the small amount of mercury that skipjack does, around 0.14 micrograms per gram of fish.

The traditional brands of solid white albacore use fish between 40 and 60 pounds, said Michael Morrissey, the Seafood Laboratory director, while West Coast albacore are caught at 12 to 24 pounds.

"So it would make sense that they have less mercury," Morrissey said.

Both naturally occurring and pollution-generated mercury builds up in fish tissue over time and depending on the fish's food source.

The levels of mercury in West Coast albacore are well within international safety standards, the abstract for the study reads.

The FDA currently recommends that pregnant and nursing women, women of child-bearing age and children shouldn't eat swordfish, mackerel, tilefish or shark. But they can eat up to 12 ounces of other varieties of fish a week. But 4 ounces a week of white canned tuna would top the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's guidelines for a 120 pound person.

Wayne Heikkila, general manager of the Western Fishboat Owners Association, said the West Coast albacore marketing association's position is that all seafood is good for people in comparison to many other foods.

"We're not going to say ours is any better," Heikkila said, "but people need to look at the numbers."

Last year West Coast fishermen caught some 16,000 tons of albacore. Much of that went to Spain, but about 5,000 tons went to Ecuador, where Starkist and Chicken of the Sea packaged it in pouches for sale on the U.S. market.

But you won't find "West Coast Albacore" stamped on the pouch. Years ago, some of the major canners did a run of U.S. tuna and labeled it as such, and it sold well. Apparently afraid of creating a demand for a product with a relatively limited supply, the line was discontinued.

Heikkila said consumers can tell the difference by reading the label on the can or pouch. White tuna has only 1 gram of fat per serving, while West Coast albacore has 4 grams. It's the kind of fat that doctors have been encouraging people to eat, containing omega-3 fatty acids.

Micro-canning operations have sprung up recently, selling West Coast albacore, and a market has begun to develop around vacuum-packed tuna loins that are good on the barbecue.