

Eco-Extremism, Not Science, Behind Fishy Salmon Scare

Views: By Steven Milloy, FOXNews, January 16, 2004

Junk science doesn't get too much fishier than last week's scary headlines about farmed salmon being a cancer risk.

Farmed salmon is so contaminated with PCBs, dioxins and other "toxic" chemicals, reported the news media, that it shouldn't be consumed more than once per month.

It was gullible media alarmism run amok as even the "scientists" whose much-reported study appeared in the Jan. 9 issue of "Science" plainly acknowledged there was no factual basis for concern.

"The potential risks of eating contaminated farmed salmon have not been well evaluated. Three previous studies reporting contaminants in salmon are inconclusive because of their very small sample sizes and narrow geographic representation. As a result, the extent of this problem and potential risks to human health remain unclear," the study's authors wrote.

Maybe it's just me, but I don't see how one gets a scary headline out of a study with that disclaimer.

In fact, there has never been a single health effect associated with consumption of farmed salmon despite countless people eating millions of tons of it over the last 20 years. That's no surprise since PCBs, dioxins and the other so-called "contaminants" considered in the study have never been scientifically shown to cause harm in humans at typical exposure levels.

Moreover, PCB levels found in commercial fish are well within the hyper-safe levels set by the Food and Drug Administration and have been declining for some time. FDA testing in 1989 indicated an average level of PCBs in salmon of about 0.39 parts per million. Last week's study reported PCB levels about 20 times lower.

Though the news reports made it seem as if we might actually taste the PCBs in the salmon, in fact we can just barely detect the PCBs with sophisticated lab equipment.

Modern technology can be used to detect exceedingly small and trace levels of a variety of naturally occurring and manmade substances in food. But the mere presence of any such substances in food doesn't mean the food is dangerous. It's the dose that makes the poison and, short of being poisoned, there's no evidence that anyone could eat enough farmed salmon to be adversely affected by PCBs.

We can expect that the media will ignore such facts in favor of hype—fear-mongering, not level-headedness, attracts readers and viewers. That the study authors decided to hype their results with a media release titled, "Farm

raised salmon presents greater health risks"—despite conflicting statements in the fine print of the study—is also no surprise given the study's origins.

David Carpenter, the study leader who gave many interviews to the media last week, has crusaded against PCBs for years. From the Hudson River-General Electric controversy to the Anniston, Ala. - Monsanto controversy, Carpenter has consistently tried to foment panic about PCBs. He's a well-known health-scare hyperventilator who likes to masquerade as an impartial "expert" from the University of Albany's Institute for Health and the Environment.

Another study author, Jeffrey Foran, is associated with the eco-activist group, Citizens for a Better Environment, which is currently waging a cleanup crusade over PCBs in Wisconsin's Fox River and Green Bay.

The study's roots in eco-extremism extend to the radical Environmental Working Group. EWG released a small but similarly hysterical report last summer about PCB levels in farmed salmon.

Coincidentally (or not), the same Canadian laboratory tested the salmon for EWG's report and the salmon for last week's study.

Last week's study was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts—the piggy bank for many extreme environmental groups and eco-activist "researchers."

Again, coincidentally or not, Pew also supports EWG.

The larger context here is that Pew opposes, and is doing what it can to stop, fish farming—including giving Carpenter \$2.5 million for his "study."

Toward its goal of ending fish farming, Pew carps that farmed fish can escape and breed with wild fish, supposedly producing young fish that are less fit for survival in the wild. (There's been no evidence of this despite some large escapes.)

Pew claims that waste from farmed fish result in undesirable nitrogen and phosphorus releases to surrounding waters. (What, wild fish don't make waste?)

Pew has also prodded Congress for a moratorium on new fish farms.

But Pew has failed to gain traction with these efforts and has unfortunately taken to funding "research" to scare the public about the safety of farmed fish.

At least the Pew Charitable Trusts are appropriately named. Like their bogus salmon scare, they stink.