

PCBs

A recent report about farmed salmon by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) has resulted in concern about the acceptable levels of PCBs in farmed salmon. While, overall, PCBs in the environment are a concern, food safety experts agree that the low levels found in farmed salmon do not warrant any change in salmon consumption patterns and the benefits of salmon greatly outweigh any unproven risks.

The genesis of the report was a sample of 10 fish done by the EWG which showed an average PCB level of 27 parts per billion (ppb) which is 99 percent under the tolerance of 2,000 ppb (2.0 parts per million) set by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The report has been heavily criticized by many independent scientists because of its lack of scientific methodology and its conclusions.

While the levels are far below the FDA tolerance, the EWG finds fault with them. Rather than the FDA tolerance, they want to use guidelines set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for sport and subsistence fishermen who repeatedly fish the same heavily contaminated waters. The implication by the EWG is that since the EPA guidelines are lower, they must be the ones to follow. That is not the case, however, since these guidelines are for a different purpose. The EPA guidelines do not represent new findings, nor new methodology.

The EWG view is at odds with not just the FDA, which has issued a statement reaffirming their tolerance (they reviewed it in 2000, specifically with regard to this issue), but also with the stated positions of the National Cancer Institute regarding the cancer risk of PCBs at the low levels found in salmon, the National Academy of Sciences (which completed a review of this topic just six months ago) and a host of other reputable, independent scientists. Much of what is in the report has been quoted in the media without much (or any) analysis of the facts.

It is important to note that this report is neither a study nor research, in the accepted use of the word. It is largely undocumented, has not undergone peer review, and lacks the scientific rigor and unbiased analysis to give it meaning. Most of all, it has no bearing on the safety of farmed salmon. Below are a few of the statements made about the study by responsible, independent scientists and organizations.

Robert Lawrence, Professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

"The benefits of eating fish rich in fatty acids are more clearly proven than the risk of PCB exposure. Omega-3 fatty acids protect against heart disease, reduce hypertension and ease joint pain and arthritis."

Lawrence led a National Academy of Sciences panel on the health implications of PCBs and similar compounds that issued a report in June. The panel decided against changing the current federal recommendation to consume two servings of fish a week.

Terry Troxell, Director, FDA Office of Plant and Dairy Foods and Beverages

"Part of our equation is looking at the overall picture, the positives in nutrition versus the trace levels of PCBs that may be remaining in our environment."

FDA officials began a review of their standards for dioxins and dioxin-like substances, such as PCBs, in 2000, including an examination of farm-grown and wild salmon. The FDA continues to recommend eating salmon and other fish because of the health benefits.

Charles Santerre, Professor of Food and Nutrition at Purdue University

"If the public listened to this, our health would be negatively affected. Any small additional risk of cancer is far outweighed by the benefits of fatty acids in the fish."

What Some Real Scientists Think About the Environmental Working Group

Marcia van Gemert, Retired Chief of Toxicology, EPA's Office of Pesticide Programs

"EWG is politically, not toxicologically, driven."

Dr. Bruce Ames, Director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Center at the University of California at Berkeley

"The EWG's baby food report, is an attempt to scare parents over something that is no threat to their children's health."

The American Medical Association

"The Alar scare (EWG initiated) shows what can happen when science is taken out of context or the risks of a product are blown out of proportion."

Sheldon Jones, Director, Arizona Department of Agriculture

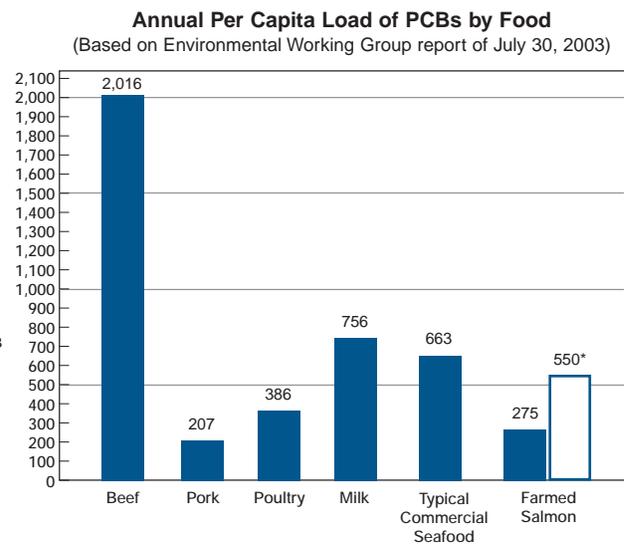
"EWG's approach is more alarmist politics and it lacks sound scientific health or risk assessment information."

The Risk Compared to Other Food

Unfortunately, PCBs are found throughout the environment. Salmon farmers aggressively deal with this in many ways and have been successful at lowering the levels over the years, as is evidenced by the current levels, which are far below the existing tolerance and continue to decline. To get a perspective on PCBs in the environment and how misleading the EWG report is if you simply read their headlines, consider the graph below. It represents the PCB intake based on per capita consumption of various foods referenced in the EWG report using their PCB numbers.

What it clearly shows is that salmon is not the source of most of the PCB load, and that even if per capita consumption of salmon were to double, it would be a fraction of what it is in beef. Note that the per capita consumption of milk means it is 507 glasses of milk a year, far below what most growing children drink. If the same standards as the EWG wants applied to salmon for limiting consumption to one serving a month were applied to milk, it would mean that people could only drink a single 6-ounce glass of milk ever other day.

This is not to indict any other food, or to dismiss the PCB levels in salmon as unimportant, but it does call the logic and motivation of the EWG report into question.



* Salmon at twice the current per capita consumption level.

Mercury

Mercury, which has been found to be a troublesome problem in some fish, prompting the FDA to recommend some individuals limit their intake, is not a problem in farm-raised (or wild) salmon. In fact, in ongoing testing conducted by the FDA, salmon is consistently rated as among the fish with the very lowest mercury levels, most often at no detectable levels.