

Panel urges caution on oiled shellfish

Salmon, halibut and other finfish in areas affected by the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill are safe to eat, but clams, mussels and other shellfish should be approached with caution.

That was the chief conclusion of a toxicological expert committee evaluating studies and data related to consumption of subsistence seafoods. The committee, composed of 15 toxicologists and public health experts from Alaska and other states, issued a statement of findings and recommendations after meeting Feb. 21-22 in Seattle.

Seattle.

The tests found very low levels of hydrocarbons in finfish, levels similar to those in fish from areas unaffected by the oil spill.

"Based upon available data and cumulative scientific knowledge, and consistent with the conclusions reached earlier, finfish are safe for human consumption," the committee said.

Specimens of mollusks taken from heavily oil-contaminated beaches showed high levels of aromatic hydrocarbons. Shellfish tested from

as either light or heavy according to their molecular weight.

Light hydrocarbons are volatile and may cause acute health effects. Heavy hydrocarbons take longer to break down in the environment and may cause cancer and other long-term or chronic effects.

The toxicological committee said the

compounds are present in many foods routinely consumed, including cooked and smoked meats and fish, grains and cereal products, fruits and vegetables. Samples of smoked salmon taken from two villages in the oil spill area tested much higher than most of the fresh

continued on page seventeen



The committee, which was formed at the request of the Alaska Division of Public Health and the Oil Spill Health Task Force, reviewed a study commissioned by Exxon and conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Nearly 550 samples of fish and shellfish were collected from sites in Prince William Sound, lower Cook Inlet and the Kodiak Island areas and tested for some 35 different hydrocarbon compounds at NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service laboratory in

less affected beaches showed the presence of hydrocarbons in higher concentrations than found in uncontaminated areas but at levels that are not considered to represent a serious health hazard.

"If mollusks are consumed, they should not be collected from areas that are obviously contaminated with oil," the committee said.

The panel said it was difficult to determine guidelines for acceptable levels of aromatic hydrocarbons in foods. The hydrocarbons are classed

• Caution urged for oiled fish

continued from page fifteen

samples tested, and one of them had hydrocarbon levels similar to the highest testing mollusk.

"No acute effects have been seen in the 11 months since the spill," the committee said. "Risk of chronic illness from exposure to aromatic hydrocarbons due to the oil spill in food cannot be said to be zero, but the contribution to levels of aromatic hydrocarbons in food not obviously contaminated with oil as a result of the oil spill are so low as to constitute no basis for public health concern."

The committee said pockets of oil in various forms remain throughout the oil spill area and that it is impossible to provide individual recommendations to subsistence users for specific beaches or harvest areas.

"Villagers should rely on common sense and their own judgment to avoid collecting foods from areas obviously impacted by oil. In addition, individuals should decide based on the appearance, smell, texture and taste of subsistence foods. If food is of doubtful quality, it should not be consumed,"

the committee said.

The committee recommended that additional studies be conducted to:

- Monitor mollusks, especially from affected areas; and fish, especially bottomfish, to document that levels have not increased over time.

- Test more samples of smoked fish.

- Test mollusks from affected areas for heavy metals and polar organic compounds.

- Test crab for aromatic hydrocarbons.

- Test marine mammals that are part of the subsistence diet.

Findings and recommendations were agreed to by the committee and drafted by Dr. John Middaugh, state epidemiologist for Alaska, and a member of the Oil Spill Health Task Force. The task force is an interagency advisory group on effects of the oil spill on health and human resources.

Those who want further information may contact Andy Williams, information officer for the Oil Spill Health Task Force, at the Division of Subsistence, Department of Fish and Game, 333 Raspberry Road, Anchorage 99518; telephone, 267-2248.