

SCARE HURTS HALIBUT SEASON

Food, Drug Shipping Ban 'Ridiculous' But Industry Acts Wisely

By LAEL MORGAN
Staff Writer

Southeastern fishermen are being forced to throw back from 10 to 20 per cent of their halibut catch this summer due to a mercury scare which well may be unwarranted.

The majority of buyers are not taking fish over 100 pounds caught in the waters from Cape Fairweather south to Vancouver Island.

Some fish in this area have been found to contain mercury in excess of .5 parts per million.

The Federal Food and Drug Administration will not allow interstate shipment of fish that exceed this limit.

"The halibut industry has moved to regulate itself to prevent the crisis that destroyed the swordfish industry and I think they acted wisely," ob-

served U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens. "If we get in a position where the public is scared of halibut, we're going to lose one hell of an industry."

But Stevens and many others question the limits set as dangerous by the Food and Drug Administration.

"Why are we saying .5 parts per million is dangerous when

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the rest of the world uses one part per million?" Stevens asks. "We had a congressional hearing on this recently but so far nothing has come out of it."

"The trouble is no one knows the baseline levels," points out Dr. David Burrell, Institute of Marine Science at the University of Alaska. Burrell is set to study potential pollutants through a crash program going on throughout the country but no money has been appropriated for this until September.

There is some speculation that the mercury is due to pulp mill activity, as the ban area includes a number of mills. Others feel pollution may come from the south 48. But there seems to be nothing but guess work.

"To date only a minute amount of work has been done on the subject," Burrell said. "The truth of the matter is no one really knows what the base level is. We believe it may be the Arctic waters."

"The only known case there is of serious mercury poisoning in this country is that of a weight watcher in New York who ate swordfish three times a day for a number of months," Stevens added.

State Rep. Clem Tillion who is chairman of the Industry Advisory Committee to the International Pacific Fisheries Commission, termed the halibut scare is "ridiculous."

"We do not have any indication that this mercury, even by the wildest stretch of the imagination, could be dangerous. They've found a higher mercury content in old fish preserved in formaldehyde at the Smithsonian than they have in Alaskan fish.

"It's just an excuse of the smaller buyers not to purchase large fish. And most of the fish they can't use are dead. They can't throw them back. It's a major loss because these are spawners."

According to an article in the Seattle Post Intelligencer, the ban was created by the National Marine Fisheries Service and local Fishing Vessel Owners Association.

The newspaper said Dr. Dayton L. Alverson, NMFS associate regional director, estimated the new policy affecting fishermen in Alaska and Washington may cost about 1.5 million pounds of fish.

The total is worth about \$500,000 and represents approx-

imately five per cent of the North Pacific quota.

A spokesman at Whitney-Fidalg Seafoods Inc., in Petersburg, explained the weight limit is based on the theory that the bigger and older the fish the more mercury could be contained. The limit was 150 pounds on June 20; 125 pounds on July 1 and is currently 100 pounds.

Rep. Tillion, whose son and nephews are all commercial fishing this summer, reports large boats off the gulf are selling all their fish.

"In Seward they're buying so the big boats who can shop around are selling. It's the smaller fishermen that are getting hurt," he maintains.

Sen. Stevens echoes Tillion's concern for those getting caught in the pinch.

"I have a bill in to compensate people who are going to lose their investment but I don't know whether Congress will go along with it or not."

The halibut problem has been hushed up through the summer because of fears it would needlessly hurt the industry and because of the industry's prompt self regulation. Glenn Luckie, editor and publisher of the Petersburg Press, was the first journalist to tackle the problem and he set about it constructively in his July 15th issue.

In addition to his front page story titled, "Halibut Fishermen Throwing Big Ones Back," he also featured a study by the American National Fisheries Institute and a story by John Sibley of the New York Times. Both are reassuring on the lack evidence of ill effects of eating fish.

Luckie's main concern is for the fishermen who are feeling the brunt of the boycott.

"This thing is hitting us real hard," he told the Tundra Times. And he forwarded us, special delivery, his editorial on the subject.

"For years we have heard fishermen referred to as the, 'Farmers of the Sea' and we think it is an apt description. Both fishermen and farmers are engaged in putting food on the tables of millions of people.

"Some years ago the federal government recognized that in order to insure adequate food supplies, the dirt farmers should have some guarantee that the crops they raised would have a market, and so if they have been subsidized by tax dollars... "Somehow the parallel between the dirt farmers and the ocean farmers ended at the federal feed bag. But we feel that if one branch of the government is going to deny the fishermen their livelihood, than it is only fitting that another branch provide the substitute...in the way of a guarantee that their catches can be sold through regular marketing channels or if their catches are found to be contaminated by someone else's pollution, then we feel the federal government should purchase the fish and destroy them.

"We do not suggest that the fishermen be paid not to fish... only that they be paid for the fish they catch."