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Aquaculture Blog--Worried about eating salmon? Think again

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With all the dire warnings about PCBs and other toxins in farmed and wild salmon, you'd think people would be dropping dead right and left. Instead, people are heeding the message that salmon tastes good and is good for you—especially your heart and the rest of your cardiovascular system.

Last year a researcher named Ron Hites and his colleagues published an article in the prestigious journal *Science*. His research was sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts. This article created a media sensation, claiming that farmed-raised salmon contained higher levels of PCBs than their wild counterparts. Indeed, wild salmon are regularly cited as containing high levels of PCBs and other toxins as well.

While this entire furor makes for great headlines, the reality of the situation is quite different. Dr. Ron Hardy, a Professor at the University of Idaho took a close look at the claims presented in the Hite study and drew some very different conclusions.

In a recent article of his own, Hardy noted the following: "My opinion of the study was similar to that of many of its critics. The consensus was that (there) were a number of points that seemed flawed...While there was little concern over the analytical accuracy of the contaminant values...a great deal of concern was expressed over the selection of samples...At the time the samples were purchased, there was no country-of-origin labeling requirement. Purchases were identified by origin based on what the buyer was told by the seller."

Hardy went on to say, "A second, more serious concern was the relatively small sample of wild salmon and the species of wild salmon that constituted the sample." In other words, all wild salmon are not created equal. They have different food preferences and, as a result, may expose themselves to varying levels of contamination, based on where they eat along the so-called food chain. Additionally, contamination in wild salmon can vary by region. Near-shore salmon, for example those found in Puget Sound, are more contaminated than those in the Pacific Ocean or Gulf of Alaska.

The final nail in the coffin of the Hites study comes when we examine our contaminant exposure not only from salmon, but from other food sources as well. Hardy notes, "For example, intake of beef in 2002 was 144 pounds per person in the U.S., compared to 15.6 pounds of fish and shellfish. Salmon intake in 2003 was 2.22 pounds per person...When total

annual PCB intake is calculated based upon average consumption of various foods, the comparisons are stunning. Per capita PCB intake from beef is 2401 ppb, compared to 30 ppb for farmed salmon. Milk contributes 716 ppb per capita...if one uses Hite's values for (farmed) Chilean salmon, for example, per capita PCB intake drops by 50% for farmed salmon. If American doubled their intake of farmed salmon, the contribution of consumption on total yearly PCB intake would still be 40-80 times less than the amount for beef."

Hardy concludes, "No matter how the data are calculated and no matter who's PCB values for salmon are used, the amount of PCBs contributed to the diet from farmed or most wild salmon is truly insignificant in the context of overall PCB intake of the average American."

Where are the headlines about contaminated and deadly beef or milk? We don't see them. Clearly, salmon (specifically farmed salmon) have been, quite unfairly, singled out by the Pew Charitable Trusts. This kind of biased and jaundiced approach to science serves no useful purpose, and only undermines public confidence in the scientific method of investigation.

The bottom line here is simple: the benefits of eating salmon, farmed or wild, and their beneficial omega-3 fats far outweigh the risks to your health if you don't consume generous amounts on a regular basis. Those individuals with marginal health (i.e., diabetes, heart disease, stroke, etc.) actually stand to gain the most.