



HAWAII SEAFOOD COUNCIL

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Symposium Objectives

Aloha to all of you and welcome to the 2010 Hawaii Seafood Symposium. I want to thank all of you and especially our visitors for coming. Some have traveled a long way across the Pacific, the Atlantic and across the country. I'd also like to ask all the Hawaii people to help make our visitors feel welcome and to help make this Symposium an open-minded exchange of information, ideas and perspectives.

What is the Hawaii Seafood Council and what is its mission? The Hawaii Seafood Council (HSC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public about Hawaii fisheries and seafood on issues of seafood quality, seafood safety, and sustainability. HSC does this through its program of education, training, outreach and research. Much of this effort is done with the support of NOAA through the Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO). This Symposium has been organized with the cooperation of NOAA PIRO and the NOAA National Seafood Inspection Laboratory (NSIL) in Pascagoula in the Gulf of Mexico because of the importance of this topic to consumers in Hawaii and across the nation.

Why did we decide to organize this Symposium? People in Hawaii love to eat fish. Seafood is essential to the multiple cultures, food traditions, and quality of life in Hawaii. Our ocean fisheries are important producers of world class sashimi tuna, swordfish and other associated open ocean or pelagic species like mahimahi, opah and ono also known as wahoo. It is estimated that Hawaii has one of the highest seafood consumption rates in the nation. This is many times the national average and many of us in this room eat much more than our share. Visitors may come to Hawaii for the natural beauty, but also come to eat fresh, local seafood.

This meeting is a continuation of a much longer-term effort to address public health issues related to Hawaii seafood products such as tuna and swordfish. Over the years with NOAA support, we have worked cooperatively with our fishermen, other scientists and regulators to assess the risk of parasites in raw tuna, to develop practical controls for histamine or scombrototoxin formation and to implement science-based preventative seafood safety plans based on the principles of HACCP. On the concerns about parasites and histamine controls, science, traditional knowledge and commonsense prevailed over unwarranted concern about health risks specific to Hawaii fish species and fishing practices. No evidence of parasite hazards in raw tuna could be found in the literature or epidemiological record and the standard fish handling practices on-board Hawaii fishing vessels that are responsible for producing some of the world's highest quality sashimi, have been shown through intensive studies to control histamine formation.

Our challenge now is that the current health message about fish is confusing the public. Concerns about mercury in open ocean species like tuna, marlin and swordfish continue to erode consumer confidence in the safety of our most popular and important market species of fish. At the same time, many health professionals tell us that ocean fish in the diet is good for the brain, heart and a

long life. Getting people to eat more fish in this country is a great challenge because Americans are not fish eaters. As a nation we eat about just over 7 kilos or 16 lbs of mixed seafood per person per year. That's not even one fish meal per week. This mixed message is confusing and presents a real danger that people will avoid eating fish and miss out on the health benefits.

We have an obligation to “get it right” and “do no harm”. How have we gotten so far removed from traditional knowledge, healthy diets and lifestyles and frankly, commonsense? My grandmother called fish brain food. I eat fish easily 7 times per week and I'll admit they are not polite 100 g portions. The scientific evidence of health benefits of including seafood in the diet is clear. What is not clear is whether the low levels of mercury found in commonly eaten ocean fish have toxic effects. As we look at mercury risk, we must accept that ocean fish are not simply “mercury delivery systems” as some would have us believe. They are for the most part highly nutritious foods that provide a mixture of nutrients, especially omega 3 fatty acids and selenium. For this reason health advisories, especially for pregnant women must be based on the best available science and evidence that carefully weighs both health risks and benefits. Health risks associated with seafood deficient diets may be more harmful than the mercury risk in seafood that consumers are currently advised to avoid. For this reason it is urgent that we get the science and the health message right and do no harm.

The Symposium Goal. In the early planning stages of this meeting, we considered several options for titles that to me sounded very serious, official and scientific. But after thinking about it, we agreed that we have the obligation to communicate effectively and to speak clearly with plain language to bring light to the state of the scientific understanding to a broader audience. For this reason we arrived at the overarching Symposium Goal of *“Making Sense of Seafood Health Benefits and Risks”*.

Symposium Sessions. In the next few days we will hear from experts about the growing evidence of health benefits of fish in the diet for children and adults. We will learn more about the need for risk benefit analysis, rather than a singular narrow focus on just the health risks associated with seafood. There will be a special emphasis on mercury in fish and the strong evidence of the protective effects of selenium that is found in rich levels in seafood. This is the key example of the need to evaluate both seafood health benefits and risks.

Beyond this Symposium. We hope that all of us participating in this Symposium will later serve as messengers to spread the lessons learned here. We intend to post many of the presentations on our website (www.hawaii-seafood.org) for more lasting and broader educational impact. Lastly we hope that this Symposium contributes to the development of improved and effective fish consumption guidance that is based on the best available science and adequately weighs the health benefits of fish consumption with risks.

Welcome again and aloha.