

For Immediate Release

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HHS Secretary Sebelius Urged to Release Revised Fish Advisory on Mercury

Washington, DC—In a letter sent last week, US Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius was urged to expedite release of a draft updated Federal fish consumer advisory for public comment. Forty members of the research and environmental health advocacy community signed the letter, including prominent scientists, a former head of FDA and organizations including Consumers Union, NRDC, Environmental Defense, Sierra Club, Environmental Working Group, Clean Water Action, Mercury Policy Project and many others.

"This essential policy update, which EPA and FDA labored on for three years, has now languished in the Secretary's office for six months with no explanation as to why it's been delayed," said Dr. Edward Groth, III. "We find that unconscionable, given the latest science showing far greater risks from methylmercury exposure than previously thought."

The current U.S. advisory, issued by EPA and FDA in March 2004, was developed in 2003, based on studies published in the 1990s, and is now out of date and insufficiently protective of public health. Research carried out in the past decade has both clarified the beneficial nutritional effects of fish consumption during pregnancy and found adverse effects of prenatal methylmercury exposure at very low doses, at least an order of magnitude below exposures known to be harmful when the current Advisory was written.

"Recent scientific findings show health effects occurring below the level considered "safe" just several years ago," said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. "This long-awaited policy update urgently needs to be sent out for comment to ensure that it's in line with the latest science. Secretary Sebelius should do her job and publish the draft without delay."

In 2009, FDA began a process to update the 2004 Federal Fish Consumption Advisory for Mercury by publishing a draft assessment of benefits and risks of fish consumption for public comment. That draft was criticized by many commenters (including some signers of last week's letter to Sebelius) for a variety of scientific weaknesses.

The FDA, in collaboration with the EPA, then revised the benefit/risk assessment in response to the comments, with a clear expectation that a draft of the proposed updated Advisory and the supporting benefit/risk assessment would be published in the Federal Register for public comment sometime in 2012.

Bender noted that several months ago, in a letter to 22 US Senators on the subject, Secretary Sebelius assured members of the upper chamber that "...completing the updated advisory remains a priority for the Administration." Contrary to those assurances, it appears that the draft advisory has disappeared into a black hole called the Secretary's Office at HHS, said Bender.

For more information:

http://mercurypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/letter_to_hhs_epa_25_apr_2013.pdf
<http://mercurypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/22senatorsresponse.pdf>

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