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Japan Urges Populace To Cut Eating of Fish, Cites Chemicals Peril

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Health Agency Issues Warning After Report Most of Water Surrounding Nation Is Tainted

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

TOKYO — Japan's Ministry of Health and Welfare has urged the Japanese people to cut back their consumption of fish because of mercury and other chemical pollution.

In a country where fish is both a favorite food and a main source of protein, the suggestion has all the impact of an advisory to Americans to eat less beef.

The agency issued its warning after a government report found that much of the water surrounding Japan had been contaminated by industrial waste.

One culprit was identified as polychlorinated biphenyls, which is a chemical group used in a wide variety of industrial processes. Methyl mercury pollution has been discovered in a number of water bodies. Other waters have been contaminated by cadmium and copper.

When people consume fish tainted by the chemicals, the result can be paralysis, severe pain and even death.

Just this past week, Showa Denko K. K., a major chemical and aluminum maker, agreed to pay the equivalent of $15 million for 13 people killed and more than 350 injured when methyl mercury spewed into the waters near Niigata Prefecture.

Earlier this year, Chisso Corp., another chemicals company, was ordered by a court to pay $3 million damages to about 140 victims of mercury pollution in Minamata Bay.

Still other cases of apparent mercury poisoning have been reported near the Ariake Sea, which had until been thought to be among the cleanest bordering on Japan.

To avoid possible injury, the government has urged consumers to restrict the amount of fish they consume. For an adult weighing 120 pounds, the recommendation called for holding methyl mercury intake in a week to 0.17 milligram. That would be about 12 medium-sized jack mackeral, or 10 pieces of sea bass or 30 medium sardines. The average Japanese currently eats about 1¼ pounds of fish a week, or five times more than the typical consumer in the U.S.

On such warnings, fish sales have already slumped as much as 30%. fish sellers complained as more than 10,000 fishermen rallied in Tokyo, Hiroshima and other large cities to protest the pollution that was endangering their livelihood.

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