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Warning on Fish Having a Severe Impact in Japan

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TOKYO, July 3—A Government warning against possible severe effects from eating fish caught in waters contaminated with industrial waste has brought drastic repercussions throughout pollution-conscious Japan in the last few days.

A Health Ministry bulletin giving limits for safe consumption of seafood—not more than six and a half prawns in one week's time, for example—abruptly altered longstanding dietary habits in many families. The results have included a depression in the fishing industry, the world's second largest after Peru's, and a sharp decline in business for the countless seafood restaurants in this fish-eating country. In addition, housewives and the general public have been provoked to widespread protests against pollutors.

To help allay public fears, Premier Kakuei Tanaka ordered his Cabinet colleagues to lunch on seafood every day—no hardship for a Japanese—as a soothing example to ordinary people. The Health Ministry withdrew its warning two days after it was issued, stating that only fish from polluted waters—not all fish—were affected, and that a revised statement would follow.

But the Government's retreat has not helped Shigeyuki Noguchi, owner of the big Moroya seafood shop in Meguro, an affluent Tokyo ward.

Mr. Noguchi no longer has to fight crowds of fellow buyers as he makes his daily purchases of freshly caught tuna, bream, mackerel and other Japanese staples at the predawn auctions in Tokyo's giant Tsukiji wholesale fish market. And Mr. Noguchi himself spends only $360 to $450 a day now in stocking his shop from Tsukiji, compared with more than $1,000 in daily outlay a month ago, he said.

"When the pollution warnings have quieted down, people will buy fish again," he said philosophically. "Japanese have to have fish."

Meanwhile, the scientific abbreviation PCB, for polychlorinated biphenyl, a product of effluent from chemical factories, has become a household word in Japan. Ingested in food, such as fish from waters containing the substance, concentration of PCB can cause severe effects including body rash, weakened eyesight, bodily pains and loss of ability to concentrate, according to Japanese medical authorities.

Physicians here have added the malady caused by PCB in fish to the list of diseases discovered in Japan as by-products of kogai, which is what the Japanese call pollution. Others are the minamata disease, caused by cadmium in the system, and the "itai-itai" ("ouch-ouch") disease, caused by concentrations of mercury in the body.

Heavy Damages Awarded

Victims of itai-itai and minamata disease have been awarded heavy damages in suits against the companies held responsible for polluting Japanese waters with the harmful substances. Three major Japanese chemical companies have been ordered to pay a total of nearly $5-million to 733 victims of water pollution, a number of whom have died.

The Health Ministry guidelines for safe consumption had been drawn up on the basis that the fish all contained varying concentrations of the dangerous substances. Health Minister Kunikichi Saito later modified the original bulletin, stating that fish and shellfish taken "in normal amounts" offered no danger.

Yoshio Sakurauchi, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, announced that fish were safe to eat in any quantity if caught outside eight specified polluted areas.

Despite these reassuring pronouncements, the Health Ministry's recommendation that Japanese play safe by cutting down on fish and eating more vegetables and meat seemed to make sense to many of the nation's housewives. Consumers stayed away from fish shops and prices plunged. Tuna, for instance, fell more than 50 per cent in a few days.

"I would rather dump my tuna into the sea," said Tadashi Teramoto, president of the Kotoshiro Fishing Company in Misaki, a small port about 30 miles west of Tokyo, contending that he was losing money at the new price.

Financial Loss Cited

More than 20,000 tons of tuna piled up in the five refrigerated warehouses of Misaki. Unsold fish accumulated in the Osaka central wholesale market as prices there dropped 10 to 30 per cent. One fishmonger in Nagoya gave away two truckloads of fish to neighborhood housewives "to restore confidence" in the product, he said.

Provincial authorities closed the port of Takasago-Nishi, near Kobe, when high amounts of chemical pollutant from surrounding mills, including PCB, were detected. The central Government summoned more than 200 provincial officials to Tokyo for instruction in detection and control measures.

Zookeepers and operators of sea life exhibits throughout Japan expressed concern for the fate of their confined whales, dolphins and other marine creatures that live on fish. "Humans can change to meat and vegetables, but dolphins can't," said a staff member of the Enoshima Marineland, which has 22 dolphins.

Some 500 angry fishermen picketed the port of Omuta near Fukuoka in southern Japan, in more than 100 boats, demanding that a chemical company in the town cease dumping waste into the fishing grounds of the Ariake Sea. The plant manager promised to speed up a recycling process to eliminate mercury and other dangerous contaminants, meanwhile compensating the fishermen for losses resulting from pollution.

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