

Alaska's Hatcheries and Melamine in Fish Food

A Briefing Document

Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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In response to reports that some hatcheries may have received contaminated fish food, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) launched an investigation into whether any Alaskan hatchery fish had been fed the suspect food. After checking with all fish hatcheries in the state, ADF&G found that most private and state-run hatcheries had received some food suspected to contain the contaminant melamine. Given the absence of a food safety risk as reported by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the fact that there have been no reports of unusual mortality or ill effects among the millions of young salmon and trout that have apparently eaten the contaminated food, ADF&G does not intend to place restrictions on fish that may have consumed it. Despite the absence of risk, ADF&G has been coordinating efforts with the FDA and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to sample lots of the recalled fish food as well as numerous fish that have ingested the associated feed.

Recent testing by the FDA has found a very low level of melamine in ingredients used by a fish feed manufacturer in the United States. Unlike heavy metals such as mercury, melamine does not remain in an animal's body for a significant length of time. Information from the FDA suggests melamine is excreted from an animal within 10 to 15 days after ingestion. In addition, the FDA states that a low level of melamine in food does not pose a health risk to humans. The sole distributor of the contaminated fish feed has taken the precautionary step of voluntarily recalling all feed related to the batches in question and is working in close cooperation with the FDA on this issue.

ADF&G's preliminary investigation has found that the potentially contaminated feed has been used by hatchery operators this spring to feed juvenile salmon that were or are currently being reared in salt water net pens. Many of these juvenile fish have been released this week and the remaining fish will be released in the near future. While significant numbers of salmon fry were given the feed suspected of containing melamine, large numbers of fish were also fed other brands that do not contain melamine, thereby diluting any potential effects.

It is important to note that Alaska hatcheries do not "farm" fish. Fish are reared to a specific juvenile size and released to fresh water lakes and streams or to salt water where they follow their migratory path, mature, and return as adults to spawn. While in the wild, they feed on wild food in the clean waters of the Gulf of Alaska and elsewhere. Therefore, no adult salmon in Alaska have been affected by this contaminated fish feed. There is no reason to believe that any salmon mature enough to be eaten by people will contain any melamine. As a precaution, however, current testing being conducted by the ADF&G and DEC will determine if any future testing may be required for fish reared at Alaskan hatcheries that are just now entering their marine life-cycle.

As additional information is confirmed, updates will be provided.