

Americans Are Being Scared Away from Seafood: NFI

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Although health experts repeatedly urge Americans to eat more fish, data released earlier this week by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) revealing that seafood consumption by Americans fell in 2007 is highly troubling to the U.S. seafood industry's largest trade association, mainly because the group suspects a deliberate misinformation campaign is to blame.

"We don't know why consumption declined the way it did, but it might be at least in part about the misinformation" stemming from various activist groups, National Fisheries Institute spokesman Gavin Gibbons told Progressive Grocer. "While there are no hard and fast numbers on the issue, anecdotally the suggestion that activists that are often circulating misinformation about seafood could be having an impact is something that health experts (from a public health perspective) are wary of," he said.

NFI's registered dietitian, Jennifer Wilmes concurred. "News of a decline means we are continuing to move further in the wrong direction. We already know close to 80 percent of Americans are not eating seafood at least twice per week."

The average American ate 16.3 pounds of fish and shellfish in 2007, a slight decline from the 2006 consumption figures of 16.5 pounds, according to a NOAA's Fisheries Service study.

Barriers to seafood consumption include negative perceptions about taste, affordability, and availability of seafood, according to a recent consumer study headed by the University of Delaware. Of consumers in the general population who heard negative messages about seafood, nearly 60 percent mentioned mercury.

"Messages that inappropriately scare consumers away from fish because of mercury can do a real disservice to public health," said Wilmes. "When people eat less seafood, they miss out on a significant, not to mention delicious, disease prevention opportunity."