Put People Before Profits

Blog post "Being Frank" Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

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https://nwifc.org/put-people-profits/

When it comes to your chances of getting cancer from the foods you eat, what odds would you like: one in a million, or one in 100,000?

Of course, all of us would prefer the least amount of risk. That's why it's hard to believe that Gov. Jay Inslee is even considering changing water quality rules that would increase that risk. The justification? Businesses such as Boeing say that protecting your health increases their cost of doing business.

There are two important numbers that go into determining how much pollution the state allows to be put in our waters. The numbers are 10^{-6} and 6.5.

The first number is your cancer risk rate from eating fish and shellfish containing toxics from pollution in our waters. Right now, that rate of 10^{-6} provides you a one in a million chance of getting cancer. But Gov. Inslee is considering changing the risk rate to 10^{-5}, increasing your exposure to known carcinogens to one in 100,000. That's a tenfold decrease in protection, and that's not right.

The second number is the amount of seafood that the state of Washington says you eat every day. The lower the number, the less protective water quality standards need to be to protect us from poisons in our water.

The problem is that the state's current rate of 6.5 grams per day (equal to about one 8-ounce portion per month) is one of the lowest fish consumption rates in the nation. It's lower even than states like Iowa, despite the fact that Washington has abundant seafood and one of the largest populations of fish and shellfish consumers in the United States.

The state admits that the current fish consumption rate doesn't protect most of its citizens, yet has used that very same rate to set water quality standards for more than two decades. After years of prodding by the tribes, environmental groups and others, the state has finally agreed to develop a more realistic rate and is considering a range from 125 to 225 grams per day.

While that's encouraging, if the state adjusts the companion number, the cancer risk rate, any increase in the fish consumption rate would be made almost meaningless in terms of improved water quality standards.

The treaty tribes have been clear from the start about what we would like to see. We think the cancer risk rate should stay right where it is, and the fish consumption rate should be at least 175 grams per day. That's the same rate that Oregon uses. We think everyone deserves at least that

much protection. That's especially true for tribes, sport fishermen and anyone else who eats a lot of fish and shellfish.

We should know Gov. Inslee's decision on the fish consumption and cancer risk rates in a few weeks. We hope he will decide in favor of protecting our health and water quality. The choice really boils down to whether we want a pollution-based economy or one that puts people and their health ahead of profits.

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