Seafood study gets industry off hook

By DANIEL P. PUZO
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While expressing concerns about the safety of seafood, a congressional study nevertheless found no compelling reason to greatly expand regulation of the fishing industry.

The General Accounting Office, the research arm of Congress, recently released its 77-page report, "Seafood Safety: Seriousness of Problems and Efforts to Protect Consumers."

The study, begun in 1986, reviewed the overall risk from chemical contamination, viral agents, bacterial threats and parasites found in fish and shellfish. In addition to reviewing the latest research on the subject, the General Accounting Office also interviewed more than 350 federal and state officials involved in overseeing the nation's seafood supplies.

Among the study's conclusions:
- The present rate of illnesses caused by seafood consumption does not constitute a widespread problem.
- Federal and state agencies do monitor, although on a limited basis, for contaminated fish and shellfish products.
- The more serious problems facing the industry — pollution and the health risks associated with raw seafood consumption — would not be solved by an intensified inspection program.

The findings, though criticized in some quarters, are a boost for the industry that has endured repeated attacks on seafood's wholesomeness by Congress and a number of consumer groups.

Many critics also have called for a mandatory federal inspection program for seafood. Any such plan would resemble, to some degree, those in place for poultry and red meats where virtually every carcass is viewed by federal agents.

"We thought it was a pretty fair report," said Lee Weddig, executive vice president of the National Fisheries Institute, a trade group. "It verifies the industry position that no (inspection) situation like those for meat and poultry is warranted at this time."

The study shows that federal oversight of the seafood industry is a far cry from those for livestock and poultry.

For instance, only 1 percent of the nation's catch is tested by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for contamination, while 3 percent of all imports are similarly scrutinized. An additional 10 percent of the domestic supply is examined under a less thorough, voluntary program of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

As for the number of illnesses, data from the Centers for Disease Control indicate that about 5 percent of food-poisoning cases between 1978 and 1984 could be traced to fish and shellfish. However, seafood consumption has risen to record levels since that period, or from 13.4 pounds per person in 1978 to 15.4 pounds in 1987. And some consumer groups claim that the illness rate is also increasing, but at a faster pace.

"The data... showed that most of the seafood-borne illnesses were associated with three species groups. Two groups include finfish that can generate biological toxins — ciguatoxin or scombrotxin — capable of causing acute illness. The third group, representing about 53 percent of seafood illness cases, was molluscan shellfish that can accumulate high levels of disease-causing agents, or pathogens," the General Accounting Office reported.

A substantial portion of the report dealt with the continuing viral and bacterial contamination of shellfish, particularly clams, oysters and mussels.

"Major problems continue with shellfish sanitation in the United States," the General Accounting Office said. "When contaminated mollusks are eaten raw or undercooked, they may inflict humans with vibrio cholerae, hepatitis, or other serious illnesses, which in some cases may become chronic or fatal."

Of particular concern, according to the study, are the increasing incidents of illegal shellfish harvesting from unclean waters, the failure of states to monitor water quality where mollusks are concentrated and a lack of regular laboratory testing to determine the extent of microbiological contamination in these products.

The study also stated that the threat posed by chemical contamination of seafood due to water pollution is unknown.