

PROGRESSIVE GROCER

Clean catch

Holiday Quality Foods is reeling customers back to the fresh seafood case with low-mercury selections.

By Meg Major

Waves of conflicting reports concerning mercury levels in seafood have churned up the waters for retailers, many of which have seen sales slip, even at a time when the health advantages of the good fats found in fish are being made abundantly clear.

Indeed, while doctors, dietitians, and health gurus all tout seafood as integral

to a healthy diet, frequent reports about toxins and contaminants in seafood also permeate the headlines. The result: consumers who feel cast adrift when all they want is to find seafood that's both good for them and the environment.

Cottonwood, Calif.-based Holiday Quality Foods decided to throw its customers a lifeline, by investing in a process that not only helps shoppers make informed choices, but also provides confidence that the fish they purchase contains mercury levels well below what the government has determined to be acceptable for consumption.

"Over the last few years, there's been a lot of health and environmental concerns voiced through the media about eating seafood," says Dave Parrish, director of perishables for 21-store Holiday Quality Foods. "On the other hand, there's also been considerable research released about the positive health aspects of seafood, and the importance of omega-3s in a heart-healthy diet. Unfortunately the two sides have been seemingly warring against each other."

That leaves "many consumers scared to eat seafood, even though they know it's good for them," he notes.

Salvaging sales

"Our swordfish sales just went in the tank, literally," in the wake of several well-publicized studies that revealed high concentrations of mercury in "big fish" such as swordfish, shark, and tuna, says Parrish. This was particularly troubling in view of "the wonderful nature of the eating experience of swordfish," he adds.

Equally troubling was the fact that all fresh seafood was being painted with the same broad brush. As the number of shoppers' nervous questions about mercury levels rose, sales began a discernible overall decline at Holiday's four fresh-seafood counters.

Casting about for way to reverse his chain's foundering seafood sales, Parrish got a tip from a friend about a company that had developed the first rapid, large-scale process for testing mercury levels

in seafood.

The company, San Rafael, Calif.-based Micro Analytical Systems, Inc. (MASI), was certifying seafood sourced from partner suppliers for low mercury levels. The suppliers then distribute the product under the Safe Harbor seal. MASI, which has been working in Southern California with American Fish & Seafood Co., a leading Los Angeles-based seafood supplier, first introduced Safe Harbor certified seafood in the San Francisco Bay area in the summer of 2006, through Lusamerica Foods, a major fish processor in Morgan Hill, Calif.

Holiday Quality Foods quickly dropped line with the low-mercury program. A full year after setting sail as the first grocer with the program, Holiday has seen same-store sales of the MASI-certified species rise by 14 percent. "Customers tell me they have peace of mind knowing that we're testing seafood for mercury," says Parrish.

The technology employed by MASI enables seafood processors to quickly and inexpensively identify the mercury level of every fish they sell. "Consumers have been asking our industry to do something about mercury, and we're part of the solution," said Jim Lanter, c.e.o. of American Fish. "Safe Harbor gives retailers and restaurants another reason to buy fish from us. We're receiving heavy interest from our customers."



Holiday Quality Foods implemented Micro Analytical Systems, Inc.'s seafood-certifying program last year.

"The biggest response has been at store level."

—Dave Parrish, Holiday Quality Foods



Since rolling out the program, Holiday Quality Foods has seen sales of MASI-certified species rise 14 percent at the counter.



