



# At a Glance

## Why We Did This Review

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Office of Inspector General (OIG), conducted this review to evaluate the extent the EPA ensures that federal, state and tribal risk communication efforts protect the public from mercury contamination through the consumption of fish. We focused our evaluation on determining how effectively fish consumption advisory information reached consumers so that they could make healthy consumption choices.

Research shows that consuming fish contaminated by mercury can lead to negative health impacts in humans. The Clean Water Act (CWA) establishes a goal of “water quality which provides for the protection and propagation of fish, shellfish and wildlife.” The EPA interprets this CWA goal as supporting water quality that provides for the protection of human health related to the consumption of fish.

**This report addresses the following EPA goal or cross-agency strategy:**

- *Protecting America’s waters.*

Send all inquiries to our public affairs office at (202) 566-2391 or visit [www.epa.gov/oig](http://www.epa.gov/oig).

[Listing of OIG reports.](#)

## ***EPA Needs to Provide Leadership and Better Guidance to Improve Fish Advisory Risk Communications***

### What We Found

Some subsistence fishers, tribes, sport fishers and other groups consume large amounts of contaminated fish without health warnings. Although most states and some tribes have fish advisories in place, this information is often confusing, complex and does not effectively reach those segments of the population. Fish advisories differ from state to state, between states and tribes, and across state and tribal borders, which in some cases leads to multiple advisories with conflicting advice for a single waterbody. In addition, although the EPA’s risk communication guidance recommends evaluations of fish advisories, we found that less than half of states, and no tribes, have evaluated the effectiveness of their fish advisories. Under the CWA, the EPA can take a stronger leadership role in working with states and tribes to ensure that effective fish advisory information reaches all such segments of the population.

**Without EPA guidance and assistance, subsistence fishers, including tribes, will continue to consume unhealthy amounts of contaminated fish.**

We also found that the EPA has not assessed methylmercury as proposed in the agency’s published Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) agendas. The EPA included methylmercury on its 2012 IRIS agenda for assessment, and on its 2015 IRIS agenda as a priority for assessment. However, to date, the agency has not commenced the assessment. Currently, the EPA’s 2001 reference dose for methylmercury is an agency-supported value that the EPA continues to accept for decision-making. Because of its importance in developing water quality standards, and ultimately fish advisories, the RfD should be accurate to ensure that effective fish advisory information is communicated.

### Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the EPA’s Office of Water provide updated fish advisory guidance to states and tribes, work with states and tribes to develop best practices to evaluate the effectiveness of fish advisories, and develop and implement methods to ensure tribal members receive current fish advisory information. We recommend that the EPA’s Office of Research and Development conduct an assessment for methylmercury to determine whether the reference dose requires updating as proposed in the 2012 and 2015 IRIS agendas. After receiving responses to our draft report from the two EPA offices, we met to discuss their comments and our recommendations. Based on the follow-up discussion and supplemental information provided by both offices, we found that their corrective actions and milestone dates meet the intent of our recommendations (Appendix C). All recommendations are resolved.