



# Fisheries New Zealand

Tini a Tangaroa

OIA24-0723

25 October 2024

Patrick O'Connor  
fyi-request-28622-af174869@requests.fyi.org.nz

Dear Patrick

Thank you for your email of 2 October 2024 requesting information relating to 'milky white flesh syndrome' affecting fish. Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA).

Biosecurity New Zealand (BNZ) have completed investigations into the potential biosecurity risk(s) of this issue in 2023. The main focus of BNZ's investigation was to eliminate the potential for biosecurity risks to be associated with this condition. Samples of finfish were collected and tested at the Animal Health Laboratory (AHL). There was no evidence to indicate a biosecurity concern regarding exotic diseases or infectious agents.

The main finding from affected fish was evidence of nutritional deficiencies. While an internal parasite load was also observed, there is no evidence to suggest that any specific parasite is linked to the milky-white flesh seen, or that there are any related biosecurity concerns regarding these parasites. Worms are common in wild fish, and even if not seen, are present in up to 90% of fish caught. Cooking or freezing fish prior to consumption considerably reduces any risks these worms may pose to humans or animals.

Additionally, five milky fleshed snapper were analysed by New Zealand Food Safety (NZFS) for bacteria which are known food safety hazards (*Escherichia coli*, pathogenic *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* and *Vibrio vulnificus*). These bacteria were not detected.

Please note, there is no evidence to suggest the affected fish have the potential to cause harm to animals or to humans if New Zealand Food Safety's food safety guidance for seafood gatherers is followed <https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/1058-Food-safety-for-seafood-gatherers>.

Please note a NIWA research report into the milky flesh snapper is set to be proactively released on MPI's website soon. This will be available here: <https://www.mpi.govt.nz/fishing-aquaculture/recreational-fishing/information-on-popular-fish-in-nz/snapper-status-and-information/milky-white-flesh-in-snapper-and-some-other-fish/#:~:text=Reports%20of%20fish%20with%20milky,%22milky%20white%20flesh%20syndrome%22>.

You requested the following:

*I am writing to request information regarding the "milky white flesh syndrome" affecting fish caught since 2019 in the SNA1 quota management region. Specifically, I would like to obtain any testing data related to the tissue concentration of heavy metal lead levels in affected fish compared to healthy controls.*

The Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) role in biosecurity, incursions is to conduct investigations and associated diagnostic testing to investigate for the presence of exotic pests and diseases. From a New Zealand Food Safety perspective, MPI does not investigate or test for environmental causes unless significant environmental changes occur, or have occurred, that may negatively impact food safety, e.g. extreme weather events, monitoring for marine biotoxins, chemical spill.

In this instance as there was no noticeable change in the environment, the MPI does not have any information regarding tissue concentrations of heavy metal lead levels in affected fish. We may however make observations during diagnostic testing that indicate possible environmental contamination. Environmental testing is generally completed by regional councils or commercial laboratories. For more information on seafood monitoring can be found on the NZFS website: <https://www.mpi.govt.nz/food-business/food-monitoring-surveillance/monitoring-and-testing-fish-and-seafood/>.

Therefore, MPI is declining this portion of your request under section 18(g)(i) of the Act, *that the information requested is not held by the department or venture or Minister of the Crown or organisation and the person dealing with the request has no grounds for believing that the information is either, held by another department (for itself and for a departmental agency hosted by it or an interdepartmental executive board serviced by it) or interdepartmental venture or Minister of the Crown or organisation, or by a local authority.*

Please see attached as Appendix One the following documents:

- A summary statement for the first sampling round of 10 November 2022
- A summary statement for the second sampling round of 31 January 2023
- A summary statement for the third sampling round of 31 January 2023
- A summary statement for the fourth sampling round of 31 January 2023
- A summary statement for the final sampling round of 17 February 2023
- The document titled 'Testing "milky" flesh fish – final report' of March 2023
- The Incursion Investigation Report of 24 February 2023
- A summary of all reported sightings of milky flesh snapper
- Various test reports

Some information has been withheld pursuant to section 9(2)(a) of the OIA, to protect the privacy of natural persons.

MPI is satisfied that in the circumstances of this case, the withholding of the information is not outweighed by other considerations which render it desirable in the public interest to make the information available.

Should you have any concerns with this response, I would encourage you to raise these with the Ministry for Primary Industries at [Official.InformationAct@mpi.govt.nz](mailto:Official.InformationAct@mpi.govt.nz). Alternatively, you are advised of your right to also raise any concerns with the Office of the Ombudsman. Contact details are: Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143 or at [info@ombudsman.parliament.nz](mailto:info@ombudsman.parliament.nz).

Yours sincerely



Fleur Francois  
**Director, Diagnostics Readiness & Surveillance**