Manuscript Number:

Title: DECONTAMINATION TRENDS IN THE AQUACULTURED FISH GILTHEAD SEABREAM (*Sparus aurata*) AFTER FEEDING LONG-TERM A PCDD/F SPIKED FEED

Article Type: Research Paper

Section/Category: Persistent Organic Pollutants and Dioxins

Keywords: Dioxin exposure, bioaccumulation, chemical markers, food

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DECONTAMINATION TRENDS IN THE AQUACULTURED FISH GILTHEAD SEABREAM (*Sparus aurata*) AFTER FEEDING LONG-TERM A PCDD/F SPIKED FEED

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Abstract

Aquacultured fish gilthead seabream (*Sparus aurata*), previously exposed to low levels of polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins and dibenzofurans (PCDD/Fs) through the diet for a 13 months period, were fed on a clean feed for another 22 months. Gilthead seabream is a protandrous hermaphrodite species and this “decontamination” period coincided with the stages of sex differentiation, maturity and reproduction of the fish. PCDD/F levels in the fish tissues (i.e. muscle, liver, perivisceral fat and gonads), expressed in pg WHO-TEQ/g fresh weight, showed a general decreasing trend during the “decontamination” period. However, this general trend varied among tissues and was also dependent on sex and lipid contents. Toxicological effects affecting fish behaviour and hepatic marker responses were also evaluated. The results pointed out that exposure to PCDD/Fs did not have an impact on fish development and reproduction, since the proportion of sexes found after the sex reversal process was within the normal range described for this species. In addition, long-term exposure to low PCDD/F levels did not significantly affect the response of most of the biochemical markers considered. On the contrary, some of them (e.g. EROD activity) showed variations in their responses during the sex differentiation process and onwards. Finally, the hepatic AhR mRNA levels increased during dioxin exposure but they returned to values typical for non-exposed fish after the “decontamination” period.

43 **Keywords:** Dioxin exposure, bioaccumulation, chemical markers, food

44 **1. Introduction**

45 Polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins and polychlorinated dibenzofurans (PCDD/Fs), also referred as
46 “dioxins”, are among the most known families of compounds belonging to the category of persistent
47 organic pollutants (POPs). Due to their stable structure and lipophilic character, dioxins tend to
48 bioaccumulate and biomagnify through the trophic chain. The toxicity of these contaminants has been
49 largely studied (Safe, 1986; van den Berg et al., 1994) . In particular, the International Agency for
50 Research on Cancer (IARC) declared the 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) as carcinogenic
51 for humans (McGregor et al., 1998) . Dioxins have also been recognized as endocrine disruptors for
52 living organisms (Safe, 1999). In 1997, the World Health Organization (WHO) reevaluated the toxic
53 equivalency factors (TEFs) assigned to PCDD/Fs for the calculation of the toxic equivalents (TEQs)
54 (van den Berg et al., 1998).

55 The main source of human exposure to PCDD/Fs is diet, accounting for more than 90% of the total
56 daily intake (Liem et al., 2000). Maximum levels of dioxins have been set by the European Union
57 (EU) for a large number of foodstuffs, including the muscle meat of fish (Commission Regulation
58 (EC) No. 1881/2006). In this sense, a project was designed with the aim to follow the bioaccumulation
59 of PCDD/Fs in a highly appreciated aquacultured fish species in the Mediterranean (i.e. gilthead
60 seabream, *Sparus aurata*) being the animals exposed to these pollutants trough the diet. For that
61 purpose, two groups of fish were considered, one was fed a commercial feed and the second one was
62 fed the same feed but spiked with low levels of dioxins. The experiment started with juveniles (~15 g)
63 gilthead seabream and lasted 13 months, a period similar to that needed to achieve commercial size
64 (Ábalos et al., 2008). Dioxins were determined in muscle (flesh) and liver tissues. After feeding the
65 spiked feed for 3 months PCDD/F concentrations in muscle were 5.50 pg WHO-TEQ/g fresh weight
66 (f.w.), being slightly above the maximum established at the EU Regulation (4 pg WHO-TEQ/g f.w.).
67 The levels remained similar during the rest of the experimental period; although after 13 months of
68 exposure they decreased and were below the maximum set. After finishing the evaluation of PCDD/F
69 concentrations during this exposure period, the next aim of the project paid attention to the levels of
70 these contaminants when the previously exposed animals were fed a “clean” feed for a given period of
71 time (“decontamination” period). Thus, fish were kept in the tanks for an additional 22 months and fed
72 a non-spiked commercial feed. A similar experiment (Brambilla et al., 2007) showed a depletion of
73 the levels of selected PCDD/Fs and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in muscle of farmed rainbow
74 trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) attributed to both, clearance and growth dilution.

75 In addition to the bioaccumulation study, another objective included in the first part of our project was
76 to evaluate the toxicological effects for the fish derived from PCDD/F exposure. Toxicity mediated

77 action of dioxins occurs through the aryl hydrocarbon receptor (AhR) (Hahn, 2001). Exposure to
78 PCDD/Fs in fish, and in particular to the most toxic congener (TCDD), has been reported to negatively
79 affect their cardiovascular function, their immune system and growth. Moreover, exposure has been
80 associated with fish mass mortality events (Giesy and Snyder, 1998). PCDD/Fs have also been proved
81 to be antiestrogenic compounds. In our study, during the exposure period to dioxins several hepatic
82 markers were evaluated. In general, it was observed a significant increase in the 7-ethoxyresorufin O-
83 deethylase (EROD) activity and in AhR gene expression after ~300 days of exposure. However, no
84 effect on the antioxidant enzymes catalase (CAT) and total glutathione peroxidase (t-GPX) was found.
85 On the other hand, differences in fish growth were not observed between dioxin-exposed and non-
86 exposed animals and no mortalities were recorded due to dioxin intake (Ábalos et al., 2008).

87 Besides the interest on following the trend of the levels of PCDD/Fs, the response of several hepatic
88 markers as well as some aspects of fish behaviour during the “decontamination” period were also
89 considered. It has to be taken into account that gilthead seabream is a protandrous hermaphrodite
90 species (Zohar et al., 1978). In captivity, all fish function as males during the first year of their life.
91 Afterwards, from the first or second year of life onwards a certain percentage of the males undergo sex
92 reversal, so that over succeeding years the ratio of females in the population increases (Zohar et al.,
93 1978 and 1984). All males in the population start to develop ovaries at the end of the spawning season
94 (around May), with the final commitment to changing sex into mature females made by September
95 (Zohar et al., 1978). Males that enter into the ambisexual state but ultimately do not become females,
96 develop testes once more and become functional males again. The studies of Happe and Zohar (Happe
97 and Zohar, 1988) showed that the proportion of males reversing sex is socially controlled, and careful
98 attention should be paid to establishing groups of broodstock, or modifying their composition,
99 otherwise it might lead to a sex ratio that is detrimental to spawning. In addition, it is well established
100 that estrogens and the enzyme needed for their synthesis, the cytochrome P450 aromatase (CYP19)
101 play an important role in the development of sex determination and sex differentiation processes
102 (Guiguen et al., 2010; Cheshenko et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2006). Dioxins may disrupt this
103 mechanism, as AhR is known to affect the reproductive pathway both by interacting with the estrogen
104 receptor (ER) mediated response and by affecting expression of key enzymes on steroid metabolism,
105 such as CYP19 (Cheshenko et al., 2008). Therefore, it was interesting to check whether an early
106 exposure to PCDD/Fs had effects on fish development and reproduction during the “decontamination”
107 period.

108 The aim of the present study was to determine the levels of PCDD/Fs in several fish tissues and the
109 toxicological effects affecting fish behavior (i.e. growth, sex distribution and sex reversal, spawning
110 and egg quality) and hepatic marker responses during the “decontamination” period, similarly to what
111 was performed during the first 13 months of the project when the animals were exposed to PCDD/Fs.

Three sampling campaigns were carried out corresponding to the periods of gilthead seabream sex differentiation, maturity and reproduction. In contrast to the former study, PCDD/F concentrations were also determined in perivisceral fat and gonads (formerly only muscle (flesh) and liver). Due to the lipophilic character of dioxins they tend to accumulate in fat. In this sense, it must be noticed that the percentage of fat in the muscle of gilthead seabream is very low and most of the fat is located in the liver and perivisceral fat. The fat present in these two tissues is mobilized during the spawning season in order to obtain energy necessary to carry out this process and a part is incorporated in the egg in the form of oil droplets. Therefore, it is likely that the PCDD/Fs associated to the fat will be also mobilized during this process. In order to evaluate the toxicological effects, in addition to markers already included in our previous work (i.e. induction of cytochrome P450 1A (CYP1A) dependent EROD activity, the conjugating enzyme glutathione S-transferase (GST), the antioxidant enzymes (CAT, t-GPX) and AhR gene expression), other components of the mixed function oxygenase (MFO) system (i.e. (NAD(P)H-dependent cytochrome c and NADH-dependent ferricyanide reductases), uridinediphosphate glucuronyltransferase (UDPGT), superoxide dismutase (SOD) and glutathione reductase (GR) activities were also included in the present study.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Fish rearing

Gilthead seabream juveniles (~15 g) were stocked during 13 months (exposure period) in four tanks. The experiment was designed to be carried out in duplicate, thus in two of the tanks, namely D-1 and D-2, fish were fed a spiked feed, while fish in the other two tanks were considered as control and fed with non-spiked feed (Ábalos et al., 2008). Once the fish reached a commercial size (400 g, June 2005), only the two groups fed with dioxin spiked feed were kept in their corresponding tanks for a further 22 months (“decontamination” period), being fed a commercial fish diet without dioxin addition until April 2007.

2.2. Sampling procedure

During the “decontamination” period fish were sampled to check growth in weight in June and December 2005; February, September and December 2006 and April 2007. In addition, fish were sacrificed in three sampling campaigns (December 2005, December 2006 and April 2007) for muscle, liver, perivisceral fat and gonads dioxin analysis. Similar to what was done during the exposure period, samples of the tissues, once dissected in ice and frozen at -20°C, were immediately sent to the laboratory and stored at -20 °C until analysis. Liver samples were also taken to perform the analysis of chemical markers in this tissue. The protocols to collect and preserve these samples are described

144 elsewhere (Ábalos et al., 2008). The number of animals sacrificed in each campaign together with the
145 tissues considered for analysis is reported in Table 1.

146 In December 2006, once the sex reversal process took place, all the remaining fish (N=25) were
147 collected and checked for sex distribution. Fish were sexed by abdominal stripping and/or cannulation
148 to collect sperm (if males) and/or oocytes (if females), respectively. Two broodstocks, one per tank,
149 were formed with 4 males and 4 females each, being the remaining fish (N=9, 6 males and 3 females)
150 sacrificed for analysis. From January to April 2007 normal spawning activity of the fish occurred. In
151 April 2007, all the animals from the two tanks were finally sacrificed for analysis.

152 **2.3. PCDD/F analysis**

153 For PCDD/F analysis, composite samples of the different tissues were prepared from a determined
154 number of fish in each case. Separate analyses were carried out for males and females from December
155 2006. In this sense, a female fish from each tank in April 2007 was not included in the composites
156 since they did not show any spawning activity. Gonads were only analyzed in December 2006 and
157 April 2007, when male and female fish could be distinguished. Finally, perivisceral fat was not
158 considered for analysis in April 2007 since only small amounts of this tissue were found in two fish at
159 the end of the “decontamination” period.

160 The methodology applied for the determination of PCDD/Fs in the tissue samples was previously
161 described (Ábalos et al., 2008). After extraction, clean-up and purification the final extracts obtained
162 were analyzed by high resolution gas chromatography/high resolution mass spectrometry
163 (HRGC/HRMS) on a 6890N Network GC System Agilent gas chromatograph (Agilent Technologies
164 Inc., Palo Alto, CA, USA) coupled to a Autospec Ultima NT high resolution mass spectrometer (EBE
165 geometry) (Micromass, Manchester, UK), using a positive electron ionization (EI+) source operating
166 in the SIM mode. Quantification was carried out by the isotopic dilution method.

167 **2.4. Biochemical determinations**

168 *Biochemical markers.* Biochemical markers were determined in the microsomal and cytosolic fractions
169 obtained from individual livers (aprox. 1.5 g) as described in Raldúa et al. (2008). In this case, when
170 male and female fish were present no distinction was made among them, thus liver samples from a
171 certain campaign were considered altogether as a group for analysis. Briefly, homogenates followed 3
172 step centrifugations (500g x 10 min, 10,000g x 20 min and 100,000g for 60 min) obtaining the
173 cytosolic (supernatant) and microsomal (pellet). Total protein content was measured in both fractions
174 by the method of Bradford et al. (1976), using bovine serum albumin (BSA) as standard. All

enzymatic activities were carried out in duplicate at 25° C, and in a final reaction volume of 1 ml or 3 ml (CAT). EROD and UDPGT activities were performed after incubation at 30°C.

MFO parameters such as EROD activity and NAD(P)H-dependent cytochrome c and NADH-dependent ferricyanide reductases were measured in the microsomal fraction. Conjugating enzymes such as total GST and UDPGT were measured in the cytosolic and microsomal fraction, respectively. The antioxidant enzymes CAT, t-GPX, GR and SOD were determined in the cytosol as described in detail elsewhere (Raldúa et al., 2008; Fernández-Díaz et al., 2006).

All biomarkers data are calculated as mean values ± standard error mean (SEM). Significant differences among groups were tested by one-way ANOVA, followed by the Student-Newman-Keuls multiple comparison test. Homogenous groups are indicated by the same upper letter. Level of significance was set up to p<0.05.

AhR gene expression. RNA isolation and quantification was performed as described elsewhere (Ábalos et al., 2008). Total RNA was reverse transcribed to cDNA using Omniscript RT-PCR kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA) and stored at -20 °C. Specific transcripts were quantified by real time PCR in a ABI Prism 7000 SDS (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA) using the Power SYBR Green PCR Master Mix (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA). Primers used were the following Ábalos et al., 2008:

AhR: 5' TCTGAAGGGGACCTACTGCTCC 3' (sense)/5'AAGCCCAGGTAGTCCTTGATTGTAG 3' (antisense).

Actin: 5'CCTGGACTTCGAGCAGGAGA 3' (sense)/5' TCTCATTGCCGATGGTGATG 3' (antisense).

CYP4501A1: 5' TTCCYGAATACGGACGGCA 3' (sense)/ 5' CGTGCAATGACCTCTCCGAT 3' (antisense).

Relative mRNA abundance values were calculated according to Eq. (1) using threshold cycle (Ct) values from triplicate assays as previously described (Pfaffl, 2001).

$$\frac{mRNA_{Tg}}{mRNA_{Act}} = \frac{E_{Act}^{Ct,Act}}{E_{Tg}^{Ct,Tg}} \times 1000 \quad (1)$$

3. Results

3.1. PCDD/F levels

The concentrations of PCDD/Fs, expressed in pg WHO-TEQ/g of fresh weight (f.w.) or lipid weight (l.w.), in different fish tissues from the animals sampled in June and December 2005, December 2006 and April 2007 are shown in Table 2. Mean values are reported together with the standard deviation (SD) of the results obtained from the two experimental tanks. In general, PCDD/F levels progressively decreased in the tissues during the “decontamination” period although some increases were observed in particular cases that are discussed in the next Section. Differences were found among tissues, sexes and also depending on the way the values were reported (i.e. fresh or lipid weight basis). The relative standard deviation (RSD%) between the animals from the two tanks was below 25% in most of the cases; higher values, up to a 75%, were occasionally obtained and are discussed further on.

The percentage of fat determined in the different samples is also presented in Table 3. These results are relevant in order to understand the PCDD/F trends observed in some particular cases.

3.2. Fish behavior

Fish growth. The growth (in weight) of the fish is shown in Figure 1 and Table 4. Growth was calculated and expressed three ways: (1) as weight gained per fish (g/fish), (2) as percentage of weight gain (%) and (3) as specific growth rate (SGR, % bw day⁻¹). Similar to what was observed during the exposure period the fish continued growing normally during the “decontamination” period. SGR values were around 0.2 % day⁻¹ reaching the animals a final average weight of 1265 g in December 2006. At final sampling date, in April 2007, the fish had lost weight (Final average weight: 1134 g) as a consequence of the spawning effort.

Sex distribution and sex reversal. In December 2006 all the fish were checked for sexual distribution. Among the 25 remaining fish, 14 were males (56%) and 11 were females (44%). After sampling fish for analysis, two broodstocks were formed with 4 males and 4 females each. However, when the fish were finally sacrificed in April 2007, once the spawning season was coming to an end, the population in each broodstock consisted of 5 females and 3 males. That is one of the males at each broodstock had changed to female.

Spawning and egg quality. Normal spawning season took place from December 2006 until April 2007. Eggs were collected initially everyday for quality check, but once the spawnings started to be produced daily, eggs were sample only once per week to check egg and larval quality.

3.3. Biochemical markers and AhR gene expression

234 The response of several biochemical markers is shown in Table 5. Long-term (13 months) dioxin
 235 exposure had little effect ($p>0.05$) on EROD activity and MFO reductases, while during the
 236 “decontamination” period a significant depletion on these activities was evidenced. All MFO
 237 components (i.e. EROD, NAD(P)H cytochrome c reductases and NADH ferricyanide reductase)
 238 evolved similarly and showed a good correlation among them ($r=0.506-0.820$; $p<0.05$). Conjugating
 239 enzymes (GST and UDPGT) also evolved similarly ($r=0.388$; $p<0.01$) although UDPGT correlated
 240 better with MFO reductases ($r=0.652-0.672$; $p<0.01$). Contrasting these phase II activities in control
 241 group vs. exposed group, despite both were elevated in the dioxin fed fish, only UDPGT activity
 242 reached significance. After 6 months decontamination (December 2005), both transferases were
 243 enhanced but decreased thereafter to values close to those of controls, although UDPGT activity
 244 remained significantly lower to controls. As far as the antioxidant enzymes concerns, only SOD
 245 activity was elevated in exposed fish vs. controls, while the other antioxidant enzymes were similar in
 246 both groups. During the “decontamination” period CAT activity was clearly reduced ($p<0.05$),
 247 whereas t-GPX and GR although initially decreased, this was not significant ($p>0.05$) and after 22
 248 months decontamination were enhanced. In December 2006, SOD activity almost doubled the values
 249 at the end of the exposure period (June 2005) and it was 10-fold higher than the controls. This
 250 coincides with a strong depletion on EROD activity, the value being 33 and 27 times lower to those
 251 from the exposed fish and the controls (June 2005), respectively. On the other hand, while CAT was
 252 positively related to MFO parameters and UDPGT, the antioxidants SOD, t-GPX and GR showed no
 253 relationship or this was negative in relation to the other hepatic markers.

254 Relative abundances of mRNA corresponding to CYP1A and AhR were analyzed by qRT-PCR in
 255 control, exposed and decontaminated fish. No significant differences (Kruskal-Wallis, $p>0.05$) were
 256 observed in CYP1A expression among the three groups. In contrast, dioxin exposure increased levels
 257 of hepatic AhR mRNA by approximately four-fold, whereas decontaminated animals showed levels
 258 indistinguishable from those of the control fish included in the first part of the study (Figure 2).

259 4. Discussion

260 4.1. PCDD/F levels

261 During the exposure period to PCDD/Fs the levels of these contaminants were determined only in
 262 muscle and liver tissue, while during the “decontamination” period other tissues (i.e. perivisceral fat
 263 and gonads) were also included for analysis. The reason is that both, the size of the gonad and the
 264 amount of perivisceral fat are very small until the fish reach a certain weight. Therefore, during the
 265 exposure period the contribution of these tissues to PCDD/F bioaccumulation was considered
 266 negligible. On the other hand, separate analyses were carried out in males and females from December
 267 2006 onwards in order to check possible differences in the bioaccumulation process between sexes.

268 Several studies have dealt with the trends in PCDD/F levels in different types of animals (i.e. pigs,
269 broilers and hens) and tissues (i.e. fat, liver) when a withdrawal period is carried out following a
270 previous exposure to the contaminants (Hoogenboom et al., 2004; Traag et al., 2006) . In general,
271 PCDD/F concentrations decreased rapidly after a few weeks on clean feed. For the case of fish,
272 Brambilla et al. (2007) carried out a study in which they followed the levels of several PCDD/Fs and
273 PCBs in the muscle of farmed rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) for a 3 months period after the
274 fish had previously been exposed to the pollutants for 1 month. A significant decrease on the
275 concentrations was also observed during the withdrawal period.

276 Therefore, according to the results of the abovementioned studies a gradual decrease in the levels of
277 PCDD/Fs was expected during the “decontamination” period when compared with the concentration
278 found at the end of the exposure period (June 2005) (Ábalos et al., 2008). The variation in the
279 concentration of PCDD/Fs, expressed in fresh weight, in muscle and liver tissue of females sampled
280 from June 2005 to April 2007 followed this decreasing trend. However, when these same results were
281 expressed in lipid basis the levels of the contaminants showed an increase from December 2006 to
282 April 2007 due to the significant loss of fat in both females’ tissues during the last 4 months of the
283 “decontamination period”. Moreover, this decrease in the percentage of fat in female tissues varied
284 depending on the tank where the fish were collected from. The fat content in the muscle of females
285 decreased from 6.6% to 1.4% in D-1 and from 7.4% to 3.1% in D-2. Similarly, in the case of the liver
286 tissue the percentages of fat diminished from 18.2% to 5.8% and from 25.4% to 18.3%, for D-1 group
287 and D-2 group females, respectively. Therefore, a higher decrease in the fat content of the female
288 tissues was observed in the D-1 group from December 2006 to April 2007. These differences between
289 the two tanks gave rise to a high RSD% for the PCDD/F concentrations determined in the muscle and
290 liver tissue of females in April 2007 when the results were expressed in fresh weight (i.e. 41%
291 (muscle) and 75% (liver)); while the RSD% was considerably lower (i.e. 14% (muscle) and 2% (liver))
292 when the results were expressed in lipid basis.

293 In the case of male fish, the levels of PCDD/Fs gradually decreased in muscle and liver tissue from
294 June 2005 to December 2006. Afterwards, the concentrations showed an increase again in both tissues
295 in April 2007. Contrary to what was observed in females, the increase observed in these two tissues
296 during the last months of the study was reflected both, in the results expressed either in fresh weight or
297 in lipid basis. This increase seemed to indicate that part of the contaminants that were transferred from
298 muscle, liver tissue and perivisceral fat to the gonads during the reproductive period were reallocated
299 once the spawning period finished.

300 PCDD/F concentrations in perivisceral fat were first determined in June 2005, when this tissue
301 represented about 1.5% of the total fish weight. At that moment only perivisceral fat from the D-1

group was analyzed. Nevertheless, this data made possible to see a decrease in the PCDD/F levels in this tissue from June 2005 to December 2006 and, particularly in the last sampling campaign both in males and females. The decrease is consistent with the fact that perivisceral fat is mobilized during the spawning season, being the levels of pollutants reduced at the same time.

PCDD/F levels were also determined in the gonads in December 2006 and April 2007, once the sex reversal took place and it was possible to distinguish between males and females. In the case of females, animals from the D-2 group showed similar PCDD/F concentrations, expressed in fresh weight, in the two sampling campaigns (approx. 0.60 pg WHO-TEQ/g f.w). On the contrary, the levels for D-1 group females increased from 0.31 to 0.65 pg WHO-TEQ/g f.w. Thus, the RSD% between the two tanks in December 2006 was 51% when the results were expressed in fresh weight. This increase might be related to the delay in egg release of D-1 group that started spawning on January 22nd, compared to D-2 group that started on January 15th. Therefore, in December 2006 the amount of fat and consequently the amount of contaminants mobilized to the gonads in the fish of D-1 group were less than the fat and contaminants mobilized in the case of the D-2 group. In addition, this would also explain that in December 2006 the RSD% expressed in lipid basis was only 13%. In the case of males, the fat content in the gonads was also mobilized during the spawning season being the pollutants removed at the same time. Therefore, the PCDD/F levels in the gonads, expressed in fresh weight, diminished from December 2006 to April 2007. However, when the results were expressed in lipid basis the concentrations increased due to the lower fat percentage that remained in male gonads at the end of the spawning period.

4.2. Fish behaviour

No effects of dioxin feeding were observed in the general behaviour, health and growth of the fish neither along the exposure period neither during the “decontamination” period. In addition, the proportions of sexes in December 2006 might be considered between the normal findings for this species. Furthermore, at the end of the spawning season a further sex change had occurred in each broodstock with one of the previously considered males changing to female.

As it has been already mentioned, dioxins are known to act as antiestrogens normally acting through the AhR inducing transcription of the phase I biotransformation CYP1A, among other target genes and its associated proteins, reducing the synthesis of vitellogenin or impairing gonadal development (Cheshenko et al., 2008; Denslow and Sepúlveda, 2007). However, the nature of the effect is determined by dose-dependent routing and cross-talk (concentration- and time-dependent interactions) between different classes of nuclear receptors (Goksoyr, 2006). This, or an adaptation of the fish to a chronic exposure to the endocrine disruptor, may have occurred in the present experiment since no changes in the normal proportion of sexes or in the frequency of sex reversal were observed in the fish

336 fed during 13 months with a low-dose dioxin-enriched diet followed by a 22 months
337 “decontamination” period.

338 No effect was either observed in the spawning frequency, the quality of the spawned eggs and/or the
339 quality of the larvae. Although a lower fertility rate than the normal findings (about 1 million eggs per
340 female) was noted, these results must be carefully evaluated because (1) the frequency of spawning
341 and quantity of eggs released were only checked in a weekly basis and the total amount of eggs
342 produced during the spawning season was not recorded, and (2) not all the females contributed to the
343 spawnings. From our own experience in previous studies involving a reduced number of broodfish,
344 one female usually dominates and spawns whereas the other females contribute rarely and in a very
345 low number of eggs per spawn (personal observations).

346 **4.3. Biochemical markers**

347 EROD activity is considered a very robust biomarker of AhR agonists exposure in several species,
348 including gilthead seabream (Pretti et al., 2001; Ortíz-Delgado et al., 2002). Although formerly EROD
349 activity was measured in the S9 fraction, comparisons are feasible as a correlation between EROD
350 activity in S9 and microsomes was seen ($r= 0.871$; $n= 31$). During the first part of the project, after the
351 fish were fed the dioxin-enriched diet for 10 months, EROD activity was doubled in the exposed group
352 in relation to controls whereas GST and the antioxidants CAT and t-GPX were not significantly
353 affected (Ábalos et al., 2008). However, at the end of the exposure period (June 2005) differences
354 between the control and the exposed groups were shortened and lost significance. The reason for this
355 lack of response after a longer exposure can be explained by similar findings in field observations.
356 That is, in a field study with Atlantic killfish, *Fundulus heteroclitus*, an adaptation in fish from a
357 heavily polluted site, that conferred them resistance to induction by AhR agonists, was seen (Bello, et
358 al., 2001). The authors explained that the resistance acquired may be due to a genetic adaptation,
359 although non genetic mechanisms, such as induction of proteins that repress AhR signalling, more
360 likely to play a role in our case study, could also be involved.

361 During the “decontamination” period a great response in EROD (and SOD) activity was seen in the
362 fish in December 2006. This coincides with either male specimens undergoing sex change into females
363 or specimens already recently turned into females. Although sex hormones were not measured in these
364 specimens, steroids such as testosterone but more significantly estradiol are reported to be strong
365 EROD inhibitors in several fish species, including gilthead seabream (Teles et al., 2005; Pérez-Carrera
366 et al., 2007). Other MFO components showed a similar behaviour to EROD. That is, dioxin exposure
367 did not significantly affect any of the reductases considered but some were also significantly affected
368 during the sex reversal and onwards. Similarly, a relative lower sensitivity of reductases towards AhR
369 ligand compounds has been reported for *Sparus aurata* injected with β -naphthoflavone, where a 58-fold

increase in EROD activity was not reflected in an elevation on NADPH cytochrome c reductase activity or phase II GST and UDPGT responses (Pretti et al., 2001).

In fact, conjugating enzymes GST and UDPGT responses in relation to dioxin exposure are more controversial probably due to the unspecific nature of the substrates used: CDNB (1-chloro-2,4-dinitrobenzene) and pNP (p-nitrophenol), respectively. In our study, UDPGT activity differed significantly between groups (exposed vs. control in June 2005 and fish after 6 and 18 months decontamination), while no significant differences were seen in GST, similarly to what was already observed in the first part of the study (Ábalos et al., 2008). A lower response to TCDF, in relation to EROD activity, was recorded in Atlantic killfish, *Fundulus heteroclitus*, UDPGT activity. Although fish from a polluted site expressed 60% of the activity of those from the reference site, TCDF injection of those fish did not affect their UDPGT activity neither in those from the reference nor polluted sites. On the contrary, GST response varied depending on the sex and origin of the fish (Bello et al., 2001). Similarly to our findings, carp UDPGT was down-regulated during sexual maturation (Sikoki et al., 1989) while in eelpout no significant variations were recorded in phase II enzymes during the spawning season (Ronisz et al., 1999).

At the end of the dioxin-fed period an oxidative stress situation was evidenced in the exposed group by enhanced SOD activity (produces H₂O₂ from O₂⁻) although this was not reflected in other antioxidant activities either in here or in the former study (Ábalos et al., 2008). In fact, not many fish studies have explored the effect of dioxin exposure over the antioxidant responses and those that did, they failed to see an effect (Pretti et al., 2001; Palace et al., 1996) despite evidences of an effect in other vertebrates (Senft et al., 2002) and in killfish embryonic stages exposed to a dioxin-like chemical such as PCB126 (Arzuaga et al., 2006). On the contrary, in the case of gilthead seabream sex change had a more profound effect over the antioxidant response since CAT and SOD were both affected, while no significant variations were recorded in CAT, Se-GPX and GR during the spawning season in male eelpout (Ronisz et al., 1999).

Dioxin exposure did not induce changes in CYP1A gene expression levels in the first part of the study, whereas levels of hepatic AhR mRNA were significantly higher in exposed fish than in controls (Ábalos et al., 2008). Our results indicate that CYP1A mRNA levels remained stable during all the process of exposure and decontamination, while AhR mRNA levels in exposed fish returned to values typical for non-exposed fish after a decontamination period of almost two years. These results confirm our previous observations that hepatic AhR mRNA levels constitute a sensitive marker for dioxin exposure.

5. Conclusions

Concentrations of PCDD/F in muscle and liver tissue of aquacultured gilthead seabream exposed to a low dioxin level through the diet showed a marked increase after 3 months of exposure. Later, these levels remained similar during a long-term exposure period (13 months). When dioxin exposure was stopped, and the fish were fed on a clean feed for another 22 months, PCDD/F levels in the different tissues analyzed showed a decreasing trend. However, this general trend varied among tissues and was also dependent on sex and lipid contents. No effects of the low dioxin level exposure during the on-growing period were observed on the fish in terms of growth, survival, behaviour, sex determination and reproduction, being the proportion of sexes of the exposed group similar to the ratios obtained in fish farms for this species. Egg spawning time and duration were also similar to what is commonly observed in farmed fish as well as the quality of the eggs and larvae obtained. Several hepatic responses were evaluated in order to relate toxicological effects to dioxin exposure. EROD activity in exposed fish showed a significant increase compared to non-exposed fish after 10 months of feeding the dioxin spiked feed. However, at the end of the exposure period (13 months) these differences were reduced. Afterwards, during the “decontamination” period, some biochemical markers showed significant variations in their responses that could be more linked to the sex differentiation process than to a reduced dioxin-supply. The levels of hepatic AhR mRNA, which increased during dioxin exposure, also returned to values similar to that of non-exposed fish after the “decontamination” period.

6. Acknowledgments

This project was supported by the Spanish National Plan for Research PN2003 ref. AGL2003 02283-ALI and “Proyectos Intramurales de 30 de Marzo de 2004. Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), Ministerio de Educación (200680I106)”. Additional funding from Ministerio Ciencia e Innovación (CGL2008-01898) is also acknowledged. M. Ábalos acknowledges an I3PDR contract from CSIC in the framework of the I3P project. Thanks are due to M. Monllaó and O. Bellot (IRTA) for their help during fish rearing and tissue sampling.

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527

528 Table 1.- Number of fish sacrificed from the two experimental groups (D-1 and D-2) in each sample
529 campaign.

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532

Campaign	Number of fish sacrificed		Tissues analyzed
	Males	Females	
December 2005	3 (D-1); 3 (D-2)		Muscle, liver, perivisceral fat
December 2006	4 (D-1); 2 (D-2)	1 (D-1); 2 (D-2)	Muscle, liver, perivisceral fat, gonad
April 2007	3 (D-1); 3 (D-2)	5 (D-1); 5 (D-2)	Muscle, liver, gonad

533 Table 2.- PCDD/F concentrations in the different fish tissues. Results are expressed in pg WHO-TEQ/g in upperbound levels. Mean values $\pm$ SD of n=2
534 tanks are reported in each case.

535

Campaign	Muscle				Liver				Perivisceral fat		Gonad			
	Males		Females		Males		Females		Males	Females	Males		Females	
	Fresh weight	Lipid weight	Fresh weight	Lipid weight	Fresh weight	Lipid weight	Fresh weight	Lipid weight	Lipid weight		Fresh weight	Lipid weight	Fresh weight	Lipid weight
June 2005	2.21 $\pm$ 0.53	49.0 $\pm$ 0.8			12.92 $\pm$ 0.70	56.1 $\pm$ 1.4			55.3 *					
December 2005	1.64 $\pm$ 0.46	37.2 $\pm$ 4.4			9.10 $\pm$ 2.02	37.2 $\pm$ 4.7			44.9 $\pm$ 2.2					
December 2006	0.53 $\pm$ 0.04	10.1 $\pm$ 1.1	0.86 $\pm$ 0.14	12.3 $\pm$ 1.1	3.94 $\pm$ 0.89	13.2 $\pm$ 1.0	3.14 $\pm$ 0.65	14.5 $\pm$ 0.6	14.1 $\pm$ 2.5	19.5 $\pm$ 1.1	0.27 $\pm$ 0.01	8.6 $\pm$ 0.3	0.49 $\pm$ 0.25	11.3 $\pm$ 1.5
April 2007	1.20 $\pm$ 0.20	26.4 $\pm$ 2.0	0.52 $\pm$ 0.21	22.8 $\pm$ 3.1	4.31 $\pm$ 0.34	28.8 $\pm$ 6.2	2.76 $\pm$ 2.06	22.8 $\pm$ 0.4			0.14 $\pm$ 0.02	13.3 $\pm$ 0.9	0.62 $\pm$ 0.04	17.1 $\pm$ 2.3

* Single measure

536 Table 3.- Percentages of fat (%) in the different fish tissues from the two experimental groups (D-1 and
537 D-2).

538

539

Campaign	Muscle				Liver				Gonad			
	Males		Females		Males		Females		Males		Females	
	D-1	D-2	D-1	D-2	D-1	D-2	D-1	D-2	D-1	D-2	D-1	D-2
June 2005	5.3	3.7			23.9	21.9						
December 2005	4.9	3.8			26.2	21.8						
December 2006	5.5	5.1	6.6	7.4	26.5	32.8	18.2	25.4	3.5	3.1	2.5	6.5
April 2007	3.8	5.4	1.4	3.1	13.7	17.5	5.8	18.3	1.0	1.1	3.4	3.9

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542 Figure 1.- Increase in body weight of exposed/decontaminated fish and control fish. Bars indicate the
543 SD from $n=2$ tanks ($n=5$ fish per tank) in each case.

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545

546 Table 4.- Monthly growth of the fish. Mean values of $n=2$ tanks ($n=5$ fish per tank) are presented.
 547

Month	Average weight (g)	Weight gain (g/fish)	Weight gain (%)	SGR (%bw day ⁻¹)
June 05	426.9	63.5	17.5	0.53
December 05	635.1	208.2	48.8	0.22
February 06	646.1	11.0	1.7	0.03
September 06	1063.1	417.0	64.5	0.24
December 06	1265.0	201.9	19.0	0.19
April 07	1133.8	-131.2	-10.4	-0.09

Weight gain (%) = $(w_f - w_i / w_i * 100)$
 Specific growth rate (SGR, %bw day⁻¹) = $100 * (e^G - 1)$; being $G = \text{Ln} (w_f / w_i) / t_f - t_i$
 w_f , w_i , t_f , t_i are the final and initial weight (w) and the final and initial time (t), respectively

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549

550 Table 5. MFO parameters, conjugating and antioxidant enzyme activities in microsomes and cytosol of
551 gilthead seabream, *Sparus aurata*.

	June 2005		December 2005	December 2006	April 2007
	Controls (n=10)	Exposed (n=10)	Decontaminated for 6 months (n=6)	Decontaminated for 18 months (n=9)	Decontaminated for 22 months (n=16)
MFO parameters					
EROD ¹	533 ± 48 <i>ab</i>	653 ± 84 <i>b</i>	362 ± 72 <i>b</i>	19.7 ± 3.8 <i>c</i>	163.4 ± 54.5 <i>c</i>
NADPH cyt c red ²	20.3 ± 0.8 <i>c</i>	21.5 ± 0.6 <i>cd</i>	24.4 ± 1.0 <i>d</i>	16.7 ± 0.9 <i>b</i>	12.9 ± 1.2 <i>a</i>
NADH cyt c red ²	47.9 ± 3.2 <i>c</i>	45.4 ± 2.2 <i>bc</i>	38.0 ± 2.1 <i>ab</i>	40.9 ± 2.8 <i>bc</i>	31.3 ± 1.8 <i>a</i>
NADH ferricyanide red ²	1490 ± 68 <i>a</i>	1604 ± 60 <i>a</i>	1621 ± 69 <i>a</i>	1103 ± 133 <i>b</i>	982.8 ± 62.6 <i>b</i>
Conjugating enzymes					
GST ²	437 ± 31 <i>ab</i>	462 ± 28 <i>bc</i>	608 ± 46 <i>b</i>	513.6 ± 40.7 <i>bc</i>	361.7 ± 39.9 <i>a</i>
UDPGT ²	386 ± 37 <i>b</i>	493 ± 32 <i>c</i>	639 ± 29 <i>d</i>	272.5 ± 37.4 <i>a</i>	235.2 ± 18.1 <i>a</i>
Antioxidant enzymes					
CAT ³	356 ± 14 <i>a</i>	360 ± 19 <i>a</i>	245 ± 10 <i>b</i>	134.1 ± 12.4 <i>c</i>	161.5 ± 25.3 <i>c</i>
SOD ⁴	1.0 ± 0.1 <i>a</i>	5.3 ± 1.5 <i>b</i>	4.9 ± 2.3 <i>b</i>	9.4 ± 0.8 <i>c</i>	6.4 ± 0.8 <i>bc</i>
t-GPX ²	88.4 ± 2.3 <i>a</i>	80.8 ± 2.9 <i>ab</i>	61.5 ± 5.4 <i>b</i>	69.8 ± 5.5 <i>ab</i>	87.3 ± 8.0 <i>a</i>
GR ²	4.9 ± 0.2 <i>a</i>	4.3 ± 0.4 <i>a</i>	3.7 ± 0.6 <i>a</i>	3.6 ± 0.4 <i>a</i>	7.3 ± 0.7 <i>b</i>

552 Mean values ± SEM from *n*=number of fish measured, are reported in each case. Different letters
553 indicate statistical significance (p<0.05).

554 ¹ pmol/min/mg prot
555 ² nmol/min/mg prot
556 ³ μmol/min/mg prot
557 ⁴ a.u/mg prot
558

559 Figure 2.- AhR mRNA abundance in control, exposed and decontaminated fish. Boxplot show medians
560 (horizontal black bars), 2nd and 3rd quartiles (boxes) and total ranges (vertical bars) of values for each
561 population, expressed as ‰ of reference gene (β -Actin), are shown. Letters in brackets indicate
562 statically homogeneous sets of samples (ANOVA plus Tukey's).

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