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## **EU Commission Asserts Leadership in Addressing Global Mercury Pollution**

[Brussels 31/1/2005] Environment and health groups welcomed the adoption of the awaited Community Strategy on Mercury, presented today by the Commission. The Strategy is a step forward at EU and Global level, giving a clear sign that the Commission is prepared to take significant measures to reduce Mercury emissions, supply and demand -not only at EU but also global level- for the protection of the environment and human health.

One point of major importance in the strategy is the intention to phase out and eliminate EU Mercury exports by 2011. "We regret that the date has been pushed back in comparison to earlier drafts, but it is very important that the Commission as a whole has come forward with a proposal, showing Europe's clear responsibility for its Mercury trade with the rest of the world and especially the developing countries, where Mercury is often used in a much less regulated way", said John Hontelez, EEB Secretary General. NGOs welcome as well that, consistent with the export ban, measures will also be adopted to ensure the safe storage of Mercury from decommissioned chlor-alkali production facilities, again asserting EU leadership to remove excess Mercury supplies from the global marketplace.

Other significant action intended for 2005 includes: a) a restriction in the marketing of non-electrical or electronic measuring and control equipment for consumer use and healthcare, b) considering options for abatement of Mercury emissions from small coal combustion, and c) a review of the implementation of existing waste regulations with respect to dental amalgam waste management and ensure correct application.

Despite the intended Mercury export ban, the NGOs caution that greater specificity will be required to adequately implement the phase-out of Mercury production at the world's largest mine in Almaden, Spain. Stricter measures should also have been proposed regarding emissions from larger coal fired combustion plants because of the significance of this emissions source both within Europe and globally. This source is too great to rely simply on sulphur dioxide controls to adequately reduce Mercury emissions.

With respect to strategic actions at international level, the NGOs commend the Commission for supporting all ongoing international activities, while proposing other action, including pilot projects to reduce emissions from coal burning in countries such as China, India and Russia. The Commission's advocacy of a global phase-out of Mercury primary production, encouraging other countries to stop surpluses re-entering the market, under an initiative similar to the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances, should become the central argument to the UNEP Governing Council meeting in Nairobi in February. At this meeting, measures aimed at limiting the impact of Mercury and its compounds on human health and environment are to be discussed and decided.

"To that end we call upon the Council and the Member States to keep at least this level of commitment contained in the E.C. Mercury Strategy, and to give immediate support to

concrete parallel track measures to substantially reduce Mercury demand and releases over the next five years at the upcoming UNEP global debate,” said Michael Bender of the Ban Mercury Working Group.

Genon Jensen (Director EPHA Environment Network) said ‘The public health community welcomes the Commission’s Strategy that puts awareness raising and education programmes to inform the public of the dangers of Mercury exposure as a key element and prioritises reducing exposure to vulnerable populations not just here in Europe, but globally.’ She continued, ‘Implementation and resourcing of the actions will be essential.’

Mercury and its compounds are highly toxic to humans, ecosystems and wildlife. High doses can be fatal to humans, but even relatively low doses have serious adverse effects on the central nervous, cardiovascular, immune and reproductive systems. Mercury has no respect for national or regional boundaries as it travels great distances through the atmosphere. It has contaminated both European and global food supplies at levels which pose a significant risk to human health, according to medical and public health professionals around the world.

### **For more information**

<http://www.eeb.org/activities/Mercury/041130-Final-Letter-on-Mercury-to-EC.pdf>.

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