



PRESS RELEASE

Mercury in measuring equipment: unnecessary health risk!

[Brussels, 21 February 2006] Environmental and health NGOsⁱ have welcomed the Commission's proposal today – amending a directive – for the restriction of the marketing and use of mercury in certain measuring and control devices. This follows up quite promptly on action proposed in the EU's Mercury Strategy adopted in January 2005.

“We are disappointed however that despite our call in June 2005, the scope of the Commission's proposal is still narrower than the foreseen action of the EU Mercury Strategyⁱⁱ”, noted Elena Lymberidi, Zero Mercury Project Coordinator at the European Environmental Bureau.

“In the end, mercury use will only be eliminated in measuring devices for consumers and fever thermometers for doctors and veterinarians”, said Lisette van Vliet, Toxics Policy Advisor for Health Care Without Harm. *“All other measuring and control devices for professional use, like room or equipment thermometers, will not be mercury-free, despite available alternatives. For example, hospitals can continue to use blood pressure gauges and gastro-intestinal tubes containing mercury”.*

Devices containing mercury can pose a risk to human health and the environment both during and after use, because they are easily broken. They end up in the waste storage, landfills and incinerators. Most of this mercury is eventually released to contaminate air, water and soil, and ends up in certain kinds of fish at unsafe levels, posing an unacceptable health risk especially for children and women of childbearing age.

A general restriction should be put in place on the marketing and use of mercury in all measuring and control equipment for consumer and professional use (especially in households, healthcare facilities and schools). This restriction should only allow time-limited exemptions where adequate alternatives are not yet available. Individual EU Member Statesⁱⁱⁱ and some hospital associations^{iv} have already taken action in banning or restricting the use of such products containing mercury – including professional devices – with several exemptions where adequate alternatives do not exist.^{v,vi,vii,viii}

“Many of these devices have already been extensively analysed. Non-mercury alternatives are commercially available – and costs are comparable”, said Genon Jensen, Executive Director of the European Public Health Alliance Environment Network. *“Any manufacturer who still wants to use the toxic chemical – in cases where there is no alternative – should then be required to apply for special permission”.*^{ix,x,xi,xii}

“Actions related to mercury measuring devices and instruments are necessary because of their significant use within the EU and worldwide”, said Michael Bender, Northern Coordinator of the Ban Mercury Working Group. *“The estimated 166 tons of annual mercury consumption in measuring and control devices represents a tremendous opportunity for lowering worldwide mercury demand. If mercury is so toxic that it is being eliminated – in much smaller quantities – from electrical and electronic equipment right now, in line with the RoHS Directive, it is absurd to leave it in so many measuring devices and instruments that can easily be replaced by mercury-free alternatives”.*

We call on the European Parliament and Council to strengthen the Commission's proposal.

For more information

See position paper:

http://www.zeromercury.org/position_papers/050603_NGOs_comments_WD_measuring_equipment_directive.pdf

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ⁱ Environmental and Health NGOS include:

The **European Environmental Bureau** (EEB) www.eeb.org, is a federation of over 145 environmental citizens' organisations based in all EU member states and most accession countries, as well as in a few neighbouring countries. These organisations range from local and national, to European and international. The aim of the EEB is to protect and improve the environment of Europe and to enable the citizens of Europe to play their part in achieving that goal.

The **Ban Mercury Working Group** www.ban.org/Ban-Hg-Wg/, is an international coalition of 28 public interest non-governmental organisations from around the world formed initially in 2002 by two US-based NGOs, the Basel Action Network (www.ban.org) and the Mercury Policy Project (www.Mercurypolicy.org) working to end pollution from the toxic metal mercury.

European Public Health Alliance Environment Network (EEN) <http://www.env-health.org/> is an international non-governmental organisation advocating environmental protection as a means to improving health and well-being. Member groups and organisations represent health, environment, women, health professionals and others. The group has a diverse membership of 41 member groups (6 international organisations, 11 European networks and 24 national/local organisations) including non-governmental organisations, professional bodies representative of doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers, academic institutions and other not-for-profit organisations.

Health Care Without Harm Europe (HCWH) www.noharm.org is an international coalition of hospitals and healthcare systems, medical and nursing professionals, community groups, health-affected constituencies, labour unions, environmental and religious organisations. HCWH is dedicated to transforming the healthcare industry worldwide, without compromising patient safety or care, so that it is ecologically sustainable and no longer a source of harm to public health and the environment.

Also supported by NGOs from the USA (Natural Resources Defence Council), India (Toxics Link), China (Global Village of Beijing), Brazil (Association for Combats against the POPS).

ⁱⁱ Action 7: "The Commission intends to propose in 2005 an amendment to Directive 76/769/EECⁱⁱ to restrict the marketing for consumer use and healthcare of non-electrical or electronic measuring and control equipment containing mercury".

ⁱⁱⁱ Countries such as Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway.

^{iv} http://www.cleanmed.org/europe/2004/english/docs/press/press_vienna_declaration.pdf

^v <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/chemicals/mercury/pdf/norway.pdf>

^{vi} <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/chemicals/mercury/pdf/sweden.pdf>

^{vii} <http://www.eeb.org/activities/mercury/Petra%20Hagstrom%20presentation%20Hg%20Madrid%20042205.pdf>

^{viii} French response to Consultation document Development of an EU Mercury Strategy Invitation to Comment, http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/chemicals/mercury/pdf/france_en.pdf

^{ix} See a detailed comparison of mercury and non-mercury measuring devices and instruments performed for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection at www.maine.gov/dep/mercury/lcspfinal.pdf and the proposed strategy based on that report at www.maine.gov/dep/mercury/productsweb.pdf. Following the submission of this strategy, the Maine Legislature enacted a prohibition on the sale of most mercury measuring devices and instruments effective July 2006. Appendix B to the report contains some examples of substantial cleanup expenditures resulting from measuring instrument breakage.

^x Global Mercury Assessment, UNEP, December 2002, p.141

^{xi} <http://www.informinc.org/fsmercalts.pdf> and <http://www.informinc.org/fsmerhealth.pdf>

^{xii} Nordic Council of Ministers, "Mercury – a global pollutant requiring global initiatives", Copenhagen 2002 <http://www.norden.org/pub/miljo/miljo/sk/2002-516.pdf>