Evidence shows mercury threat underestimated ahead of UN treaty talks

[4 December 2012, Brussels]--New reports released today show widespread global mercury contamination of seafood and health effects from methylmercury in seafood occurring below the level that was considered "safe" just a few years ago. The Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) [1], in cooperation with the Biodiversity Research Institute (BRI) [2], is facilitating the release of the three reports.[3]

"The level of mercury in the Pacific Ocean is projected to increase by 50% by 2050 if current pollution trends continue unabated," said Richard Gutierrez, executive director of Ban Toxics!, located in Quezon City, Philippines. *"This is a wake-up call for all governments to stem the rising tide of mercury pollution and finalize a strong treaty."*

The new scientific findings are to be presented at the start of the fifth and final round of United Nations negotiations to put in place a legally binding global treaty to reduce mercury use and pollution [4]. The legal text negotiated by the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee is expected to be completed on 18 January 2013 in Geneva, Switzerland.

"The latest science points to the need for strict reduction measures to address the global mercury crisis," said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, co-coordinator of ZMWG at the European Environment Bureau in Brussels, Belgium.

Other key science findings include the following:

- Larger predatory fish—such as swordfish, shark and certain species of tuna—are often listed in national fish consumption advisories due to higher mercury concentrations. Different seafood varieties can differ by at least 100-fold in their average mercury content.
- Seafood regularly consumed by people contains mercury concentrations that commonly exceed "safe" levels (based upon US EPA standards [5]). However, there are also plenty of low mercury seafood alternatives with high omega 3 benefits;
- Several recent epidemiological studies clearly show that the consumption of ordinary amounts of fish can cause an unsafe risk to the developing foetus and children, suggesting that the current health exposure tolerance levels should be revised to reflect the latest scientific findings; and
- BRI's Global Biotic Mercury Synthesis (GBMS) project provides a standardized and comprehensive database that can be used to identify mercury data gaps, describe areas where further research is needed, and evaluate the effectiveness of the future global mercury treaty.

"We believe it is crucial to understand global baseline mercury concentrations in order to make appropriate decisions on how to evaluate the effectiveness of the treaty," David C. Evers, Ph.D., executive director of BRI and a member of the UNEP Fate and Transport Partnership Group.

ENDS

[1] Zero Mercury Working Group is a coalition of more than 95 NGOs around the world working towards zero supply, demand, and emissions of mercury from all anthropogenic sources, with the goal of reducing mercury in the global environment to a minimum. www.zeromercury.org

[2] Biodiversity Research Institute's mission is to assess emerging threats to wildlife and ecosystems through collaborative research, and use scientific findings to advance environmental awareness and inform decision makers.

[3] The report from BRI reveals patterns of global seafood mercury concentrations. A companion report written by Dr. Edward Groth III for the ZMWG provides an overview of epidemiological evidence for mercury effects on human health and a rationale for lower tolerance levels. Finally, ZMWG presents a short summary of the report findings, and provides recommendations. Links to all the reports are available at: www.zeromercury.org.

[4] http://new.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Mercury/Negotiations/tabid/3320/Default.aspx

[5] The United States Environmental Protection Agency's health-based reference dose for methylmercury is 1x10-4 milligrams/kilogram-day, a body weight of 132 pounds or 60 kilograms and a fish meal size of 6 ounces or 170 grams.

Patterns of Global Seafood Mercury Concentrations and their Relationship with Human Health [EMBARGOED]

Mercury Contamination, Exposures and Risk: Summary and Recommendations (Zero Mercury Summary and Recommendations)

An Overview of Epidemiological Evidence on the Effects of Methylmercury on Brain Development, and a Rationale for a Lower Definition of Tolerable Exposure

Contacts:

ZMWG /EEB – Alison Abrahams - alison.abrahams@eeb.org +32 489 304 962

BRI - Deborah McKew - deborah.mckew@briloon.org - +1 (207) 839-7600 x222