EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL BUREAU

Press Release:

EC study opens the way to phasing mercury out of dentistry and button cell batteries

[23/7/2012, Brussels, Belgium] — The EEB welcomed a new European Commission study, which recommends phasing out dental amalgam use in the next five years, while improving enforcement of existing EU waste legislation[1]. Likewise, the study also recommended phasing out mercury use in button cell batteries within the two years after legislation is adopted.

“Once again a report has conclusively shown that mercury use must be phased out,” said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, Project Coordinator of EEB’s Zero Mercury Campaign. “The European Institutions and EU Member States need to therefore take action against mercury use as the report recommends. Effective and affordable alternatives to mercury use in dentistry are available. It is high time that mercury becomes the exception rather than the rule.’

Amalgam's negative environmental effects are known in the EU and globally, and ultimately, society pays for the uncontrolled release of dental mercury through additional pollution control costs and the health effects associated with mercury pollution.

Sweden has already phased out dental mercury, while Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Italy have all significantly reduced amalgam use[2]. Others, including Germany, Spain, Italy and Austria, either have restrictions or guidance on amalgam in place.

Many EU dentists are already using alternatives to dental mercury like composite and glass ionomer. As the report explains, "Unlike dental amalgam, mercury-free materials have been the subject of continuous technical improvements in the past years and this trend is expected to continue."

The BIOS report noted that mercury-free fillings appear more expensive than amalgam because the negative external costs associated with management of amalgam waste and effluents are not factored into the market price. Michael Bender, director of the US-based Mercury Policy Project pointed out that if they were, then the real price would be different. Referring to the situation in the US he said: "If the cost externalities of amalgam were factored in, the average price of an amalgam would be equal to or approximately 15% higher than that of a composite[3] ". He added that "A similar result could be expected in the EU, because the EU management of amalgam releases and cost difference between composite and amalgam is comparable to that of the U.S."

In view of both the environmental concerns and the precautionary principle regarding direct health effects from amalgams, the European Environmental Bureau is urging the European Commission and Member States to act immediately to phase out the use of mercury in the dentistry and button cell batteries as quickly as possible.

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[1] Study on the potential for reducing mercury pollution from dental amalgam and batteries, Final report prepared for the European Commission – DG ENV, BIO Intelligence Service (2012). http://ec.europa.eu/environment/chemicals/mercury/pdf/Final_report_11.07.12.pdf

[2] according to the BIOS study

[3] EEB, MPP, CDC Publication ‘ The Real Cost of Dental Mercury ’, March 2012