Canadian Environmental Law Association

POLLUTION PROBE
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Mercury in Fish a Global Health Concern: Warrants Immediate United Nations Action

Pollution Probe and the Canadian Environmental Law Association endorse Canadian release of report from international coalition

Toronto, ON — In advance of next week's United Nations meeting to discuss an international treaty on mercury, public interest organizations from across the globe today released a report on the global health hazards created by mercury contamination in fish. The international *Zero Mercury Working Group* reports that the worldwide health impacts of methylmercury in fish are substantial. They are demanding an effective response from governments and the United Nations.

The Zero Mercury Working group (www.zeromercury.org) is an international coalition of more than 75 public interest non-governmental organizations from around the world formed in 2005. The aim of the group is to continually reduce emissions, demand and supply of mercury, from all sources we can control, with the goal of eliminating mercury in the environment.

"Mercury contamination of fish and mammals is a global public health concern," said Michael Bender, report co-author and member of the *Zero Mercury Working Group*. "Our study of fish tested in different locations around the world shows that widely accepted international exposure levels for methylmercury are exceeded, often by wide margins, in each country and area covered."

According to the report, *Mercury in Fish: An Urgent Global Health Concern,* the risk is greatest for populations whose per capita fish consumption is high, and in areas where pollution has elevated the average mercury content of fish. In cultures where fish-eating marine mammals are part of the traditional diet, mercury in these animals can add substantially to total dietary exposure. These factors have contributed to substantial methylmercury exposure among the Inuit.

Eating large amounts of fish, or even small amounts of high-mercury content fish can cause mercury poisoning. Of most serious concern are the impacts of mercury on the developing brain, especially when exposure occurs in the womb. Toxic effects on the brain may also occur in adults and children with methylmercury intake above reference levels. Research also suggests that methylmercury exposure increases the risk of cardiovascular disease.

The impacts on the brain from mercury are well understood and eating fish is the single largest exposure source. However, we also know that fish is a very healthy food choice. Ironically, eating

fish provides excellent nutritional support to healthy brain development. The solution is *not* for people to stop eating fish. Instead, educational efforts must ensure that people follow fish advisories: they should choose low-mercury fish and limit or avoid those known to have high mercury content. For example, for Inuit it is recommended to eat more sea-run arctic char, which is very low in mercury, and less marine mammals that have been found to have higher mercury levels. Fish advisories are issued by Health Canada. Since fish species and fishing practices vary widely across Canada, provincial governments and many local public health authorities also issue guidance on choosing low-mercury fish.

Education is essential to reduce human exposure to mercury; however, it should not be a substitution for the ultimate goal to reduce mercury concentrations in the environment to the lowest level possible. Mercury contamination from human activities exists on a global scale and calls for a global response. Global reduction and elimination of mercury is necessary to protect human and environmental health. Based on the findings of the report, Pollution Probe and the Canadian Environmental Law Association join our international counterparts in endorsing the recommendations in *Mercury in Fish: An Urgent Global Health Concern.* We further recommend the following actions in Canada:

1. The Government of Canada should support the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council in establishing an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) for the purpose of negotiating a free-standing legally binding instrument on mercury at the upcoming mid-February meeting in Nairobi.
2. Canada should demonstrate leadership and ban non-essential uses of mercury in products and processes.

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The report is available on the websites of:

Mercury Policy Project: www.mercurypolicy.org,
Canadian Environmental Law Association www.cela.ca
Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca

For more information on fish advisories, please visit:

Health Canada advisory:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/chem-chim/environ/mercur/cons-adv-etud-eng.php

Ontario Ministry of Environment Sport Fishing advisory: http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/guide/

Toronto Public Health fish consumption advisory:
http://www.toronto.ca/health/fishandmercury/advice_eat_fish.htm