



PRESS RELEASE “EU set to lock down mercury”

(Brussels/Strasbourg, 21 May 2008) - Environmental and health NGOsⁱ were very pleased that decision makers have found an agreement to implement an EU-wide ban on exports of mercury and to safely store the surplus.

In a 2nd reading plenary vote, the European Parliament approved the compromise amendments previously agreed with the Council. *“Reason reigned at the end, narrowly overturning the threat of a deal-breaker, said Elena LyMBERIDI-Settimo, EEB’s Project Coordinator of the Zero Mercury Campaign. Although we would have liked to see a more robust regulation, this agreement between the two institutions is a very good step towards locking down mercury in the EU.”*

Already supported by the Parliament, the compounds now included in the export ban are cinnabar ore, calomel and mercury oxide, with some medical and research exceptions. Export of mixtures of mercury with other substances having a mercury concentration of at least 95% has also been banned.

The NGOs are pleased that after all their efforts, the ban now includes those compounds which would otherwise pose a serious loophole in the regulation. Closing this loophole means that another 50-100 tonnes of mercury per year¹, which could have been recovered from calomel will not be exported from the EU onto the world market.

Storage of metallic mercury which is considered waste will now take place either temporarily or permanently in underground salt mines and hard deep bedrock. In addition, temporary storage is still possible above-ground. Although the door to permanent underground disposal of liquid mercury is open, any technological advances in transforming liquid mercury into a solid compound must now be considered before mercury can be accepted for disposal into adapted underground facilities. The NGOs hope that, provided that an environmentally safe solidification process is available soon, it will become mandatory requirement before such a highly toxic substance is disposed of out of sight, ensuring a long term safety for people and the environment. .

Several features of the new ban did not come into the compromise agreement, including extending the scope to mercury-containing products which are banned from sale in the EU and an import ban. These features are to be reviewed in the coming years, and the European Commission will present a proposal for a revision of the regulation by March 2013.

“We do regret that mercury-containing products which are forbidden in Europe were not included in the export ban, because we believe it constitutes a double standard that hurts public health,” said Lisette van Vliet of Health Care Without Harm Europe “However, we hope that the momentum started by the ban will tackle more uses as countries increasingly recognise the need to stop using this toxic liquid”.

Parliament and Council met half way on the implementation date of the export ban, now by 15 March 2011.

“Better sooner than later,” said Zuleica Nycz, Association for the combat against POPs (ACPO), Brazil. “ The EU has finally closed the door on easily available mercury reaching developing countries, like Brazil, where it has been carelessly used in artisanal and small scale gold mining, almost all of it ending up in the environment contaminating fish and people. It is now time that other countries follow this example, to better protect our global health and environment, and move towards a global legally binding instrument on mercury.”

NGOs call on the Environment Council to endorse the Parliament text as agreed, and on the European Commission to proceed swiftly with official publication and implementation arrangements.

¹ Mercury flows and safe storage of surplus mercury, August 2006, Concorde East/West for EC DG ENV, p.8

Editor's notes:-

See full position paper as sent to the Environment committee of the European Parliament, 17 March 2008,

http://www.eeb.org/publication/documents/080317_NGOsLettertoENVI-2ndRead-Hg-export-ban.pdf

Mercury is a global pollutant that travels long distances. Its most toxic form – methylmercury - accumulates in large predatory fish and is taken up in our bodies through eating fish, with the worst impacts on babies in utero and small children. For more information, see Zero Mercury Campaign, www.zeromercury.org and “Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” <http://www.env-health.org/r/145>

For further information:-

Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, EEB [Zero Mercury Project Coordinator](mailto:elena.lymberidi@eeb.org), elena.lymberidi@eeb.org,
T: +32 2 289 13 01 GSM: +32 496 532818

Lisette van Vliet, Health Care Without Harm Europe, Toxic Policy Adviser, lisette@env-health.org,
T: +32 2 234 3645; GSM: +32 484 614 528

Vanessa Bulkacz, EEB Press & Publications Officer: press@eeb.org; Tel: +32 (0)2 289 1309

ⁱ Environmental NGOS include

The **European Environmental Bureau (EEB)**, www.eeb.org, is a federation of more than 140 environmental citizens' organisations based in EU Member States and most Accession Countries, as well as in a few neighbouring countries. 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 **Zero Mercury Working group**, www.zeromercury.org, is an international coalition of more than 40 public interest non-governmental organizations from around the world formed in 2005 by the EEB and the Mercury Policy Project/Ban Mercury Working Group. The aim of the group is to reach “Zero’ emissions, demand and supply of mercury, from all sources we can control, towards eliminating mercury in the environment at EU level and globally.”

Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), <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 organizations) 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 health care systems, medical and nursing professionals, community groups, health-affected constituencies, labour unions, environmental and religious organisations. HCWH is dedicated to transforming the health care 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.