

Health Experts Call on EU to Impose Total Ban on Use of Mercury

January 11, 2007 — By Constant Brand, Associated Press

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Health and environmental experts called on the European Union on Wednesday to push for a global ban on the use of mercury, warning that the highly toxic chemical continues to pose severe health risks.

In a report, a pan-European group of health care experts, professionals and activists called on the 27-nation EU to step up efforts to rid the continent of mercury, which it said continues to be used in everything from dental fillings to medical devices such as thermometers.

"Even if we stopped all mercury production and spills and emissions today, our global food supply would still be contaminated for years to come," said Genon Jensen, director of the Health and Environment Alliance, who presented the report to EU lawmakers at the European Parliament.

The report calls for a "general restriction on all remaining uses of mercury in products."

The EU's executive Commission has called for a ban on exports of mercury from 2011 and the European Parliament is backing a phase out of mercury in measuring devices, except barometers and antique instruments. The EU governments have yet to give their approval.

The European Commission said it would push for a worldwide agreement to reduce human and environmental exposure to mercury at a United Nations Environment Program meeting next month in Nairobi, Kenya.

The EU is the world's biggest exporter of mercury, which is gradually being phased out by industry.

The group's report claims that low-level exposure to mercury by pregnant women is dangerous for the unborn child. "Mercury has long been recognized as a major source of toxicity in children causing reduced cognitive functioning, including reduced IQ," Dutch pediatrician Gavin ten Tusscher told EU lawmakers.

He added that even low exposure to the chemical "can cause damage to the developing brain of the fetus and infant."

Similar conclusions have been made in other studies conducted worldwide. Scientists say mercury poisoning can be fatal and even small amounts can damage the nervous system. Elevated mercury levels have been linked to learning disabilities and developmental delays in children and to heart, nervous system and kidney damage in adults.

Jensen called on the EU to launch a public education campaign to better inform about the risks of mercury, notably to pregnant women. The report reiterated that harmful human exposure to mercury is mainly through the consumption of certain types of fish.

Traces of mercury are found in nearly all fish and shellfish. Released through industrial pollution, mercury falls and accumulates in streams and oceans as a more toxic form, methylmercury. This can pass through the blood barrier and into the placenta, posing a particular risk to pregnant women and

children.

However, health experts stress that people should not avoid eating fish altogether.

"We are simply saying that it's better to eat smaller fish that are lower in the food chain and therefore less contaminated with mercury," Jensen said.

The European health experts called on the EU however to push for a total global ban at the U.N. talks in Nairobi, warning that mercury emissions could be rising.

Source: Associated Press

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