

Presentation Abstract

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Plenary Session 5

Panel Discussion: Policies on Management of Mercury Stockpiles & Mercury-Bearing Waste

Presentation

Halting the Use, Recycling, Trade and Release of Mercury

The combination of international trade and atmospheric transport has assured that the mercury problem is a transboundary one. Widespread global mercury contamination is due to emissions from fossil fuel consumption, mining, industrial practices, waste disposal, and other sources. According to recent research from the U.S.G.S. , there's been a 20-fold increase in atmospheric mercury deposition over the last 270 years. Human activities are said to contribute 70 percent of emissions over the past one hundred years.

Mercury pollution is now widely recognized as posing a serious risk to one of the world's most important protein sources-- fish-- for a major portion of the world's population, both now and into the foreseeable future. Levels of mercury in fish have increased in some countries by a factor of five. Thus, a major global source of protein is becoming poisoned and may actually become unusable in the future. Therefore, in order to create a healthy living environment for our children and future generations, we must halt its use, recycling and release wherever feasible.

No one country can solve the mercury problem alone - global cooperation is key. Recently, we have witnessed the increased export of mercury from developed countries to poorer developing countries, resulting in issues of global environmental justice. Thus, it is essential for industrialized and developing nations to join together to provide leadership in consultation and treaty convention mechanisms to bring about international commitments and to leverage the capability to adopt a global mercury treaty.

In support of these efforts, we have recently convened the Ban Mercury Working Group (see www.ban.org/Ban-Hg-Wg/) -- a global network of public interest non-profit organizations concerned about halting the proliferation and destruction of mercury, and minimizing exposure to it. Our primary objective at this time is to support developing the United Nation Environment Program's Global Mercury Assessment (see www.chem.unep.ch/mercury) and to support the following objectives:

- a) Use of mercury must be phased out in both the South and the North and all new mining must cease;
- b) Human and wildlife exposures should be reduced and support provided to artisanal miners to reduce their mercury use and release;

c) Mercury releases from all sources must be subject to continuing minimization, and ultimate elimination as feasible;

d) Commodity transactions and global trade in mercury must be reduced and then eliminated;

e) Long term storage facilities must be created to assure environmentally sound storage of existing quantities of mercury; and

f) In the interim, the South must not become a dumping ground for mercury-based technologies, products and/or wastes.

The objectives of the Ban Mercury Workgroup serve the collective purpose of phasing out mercury use and reducing mercury trading, release, and loading to the global pool. Investing in the elimination of mercury use is far more efficient and effective-and ultimately much less costly - than allowing the perpetuation of use while attempting to control its release at the end of the pipe. Our vision is that within the current generation virtually all mercury use will be eliminated, anthropogenic releases significantly reduced, mercury stored rather than traded, and human and wildlife exposures minimized to the extent possible.