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Mercury threat rising in Ontario

Northern mining may compromise health of Ontario fish-eaters

TORONTO, March 6 /CNW/ - On the heels of a major international mining convention in Toronto, a broad coalition of environmental groups, First Nations and academics are demanding that the Ontario Government investigate the looming threat of mercury contamination from industrial activities in the province's Boreal Forest.

The groups highlight research that suggests dramatic changes in water levels associated with mining operations will release vast amounts of mercury into the local environment, contaminating fish and wildlife and ultimately poisoning humans.

"Industrial activities such as mines, hydroelectric dams and logging in the Boreal Forest will fundamentally change the landscape and will cause mercury to be released," said Dr. Lean, Professor of Ecotoxicology of the University of Ottawa. "What is most troubling is that this increased risk of mercury contamination was not accounted for in the environmental assessment of the region's first approved large diamond mining operation - Debeers Victor Diamond Mine, near Attawapiskat."

Mercury accumulates in soil and plants and is transformed into methylmercury. Fish such as pike, walleye, bass and trout accumulate methylmercury at levels thousands of times higher than in the surrounding water. In humans, mercury exposure has significant neurological and developmental effects, such as learning disabilities, birth defects, tremors, and cerebral palsy.

In the late 1960s, a pulp and paper mill began contaminating the English-Wabigoon River with mercury. The plant has since closed, but community members still continue to struggle with debilitating health problems. "Our people are still struggling with mercury poisoning from more than 30 years ago, not to mention the additional impacts of mercury released from clearcut logging on our lands" said Steve Fobister, Councillor, from Grassy Narrows First Nation who is in Toronto today. "Enough is enough. The government must act now to better protect us from further mercury contamination."

The groups' complaints are documented in an Application for Review filed under Ontario's Environmental Bill of Rights, filed recently on behalf of CPAWS Wildlands League by Ecojustice (formerly Sierra Legal Defence Fund).

"Methylmercury is a potent neurotoxin that is highly toxic to human beings and wildlife," said Anna Baggio, Director, Conservation Land Use Planning, CPAWS Wildlands League. "We demand that the province begin rigorous monitoring of mercury levels in northern communities and the Boreal Forest and ensure that potential health and environmental impacts of methylmercury are analyzed prior to approving additional industrial operations."

"The Ministry of Environment uses an outdated water quality standard for mercury, which does not even meet the inadequate minimum national standard," said Dr. Anastasia Lintner, Staff Lawyer and Economist from Ecojustice. "What Ontario needs is an overarching action plan on mercury. Ontario needs to act now, before the mercury rises."

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see www.wildlandsleague.org