

Media Advisory

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Mercury Still Killing in Grassy Narrows

Shocking health study confirms Native health concerns; questions Health Canada guidelines

Toronto - The health impacts of mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows people are worse now than in the 1970's, say the shocking results of a newly translated health study by Japanese mercury expert Dr. Harada. The translated study is being released today on the 40th anniversary of when Ontario first banned fishing on the Wabigoon River due to mercury contamination by the Dryden paper mill upstream. The study finds that Health Canada safety guidelines are too weak to protect people from the cumulative long-term health impacts of low level mercury exposure, which is now ubiquitous worldwide due to industrial pollution from sources such as coal burning power plants.

PRESS CONFERENCE. April 6, Noon.

Where: Steelworkers Hall, 25 Cecil St. (South of College, East of Spadina)

Speakers: Chief Simon Fobister, Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse, Maude Barlow, Judy Da Silva.

Content: The latest Grassy Narrows mercury health study will be released, and discussed by the speakers who will demand action from the government of Ontario.

Newly translated health study downloadable at FreeGrassy.org on April 6.

VISUAL: RIVER RUN CREATIVE MARCH AND RALLY. April 7, Noon.

What: Hundreds of Grassy Narrows members, and their supporters, will deploy 1,000 meters of blue fabric to create a wild river that will flow up University Ave. to Queen's park to deliver their demands, accompanied by traditional and samba drum groups, and by activists wearing animal costumes and large colourful fish puppets.

Where: Noon. Grange Park (behind the AGO on Beverly South of Dundas).

End: Arriving at Queen's Park around 1 p.m. for speeches and demands.

Shots: Grassy Narrows women and youth lead the march up through Queen's Park to the Parliament accompanied by a huge river of supporters with massive blue fabric rippling in the wind. Aerial shots available from public buildings on University Avenue (UofT lounges at College, Hospitals).

Speakers: Grassy Narrows mothers, Chief Fobister, Regional Chief Angus Toulouse, Bruce Cox (Greenpeace ED), Craig Benjamin (Amnesty), Meera Karunanathan (Council of Canadians), Joanne Webb (CUPE), and more.

PUBLIC SPEAKING EVENT. April 6, 6:30 p.m.

Speakers: Maude Barlow, Judy Rebick, Grassy Narrows Women's Drum Group.

Where: Steelworkers Hall, 25 Cecil St. (South of College, East of Spadina).

For more information go to: FreeGrassy.org

Context

Dr. Harada, who played a key role in exposing mercury poisoning in Minamata Japan, first visited Grassy Narrows and White Dog in 1975. He found people with mercury levels over 3 times the Health Canada limit in Grassy Narrows, and 7 times the limit in White Dog. When he returned in 2004 he found that 43% of his original Grassy Narrows patients were dead, including all those who had mercury levels above the Health Canada guidelines in 1975. Among the people who had levels below Health Canada guidelines in 1975, 89% were diagnosed with Minamata Disease (mercury poisoning), or possible Minamata Disease in 2004, even though their mercury levels were now even lower than before.

Between 1962 and 1970 the Dryden mill dumped 20,000 pounds of mercury into the Wabigoon River, with the Province's permission. According to a report prepared for the UN, less than 1/50th of a teaspoon of mercury per 8 hectare lake surface is enough to make fish unfit for human consumption. The people of Grassy Narrows, Wabaseemoong, and Wabauskang First Nations were downstream and hurt by the health, social, and economic impacts of this poison. Overnight unemployment in Grassy Narrows skyrocketed from 10% to 90%, and a sacred food staple was lost.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin and a persistent pollutant whose health impacts include tunnel vision, loss of coordination, numbness in the extremities, tremors, loss of balance, and speech impediments. Dr. Harada's report states that "[t]he possibility of congenital Minamata Disease occurrence is very high in these two communities." Many Grassy Narrows mothers who cannot afford to buy food still eat fish during pregnancy and report delayed development, cerebral palsy, seizures, and other illnesses in their children.

A compensation deal in 1985, reached after 7 years of negotiations, amounted to merely \$8,000 per resident in Grassy Narrows and White Dog. Under the deal residents whose mercury poisoning is acknowledged by the Mercury Disability Board receive \$250 to \$800 a month. However, the Mercury Disability Board acknowledged only 38% of the people Dr. Harada diagnosed with Minamata Disease, Minamata Disease with complications, and possible Minamata Disease. Residents of Wabauskang (formerly Quibell), have never been compensated at all, despite reporting many miscarriages, stillbirths, and early childhood deaths from mercury poisoning.

Health Canada has stopped testing for mercury in Grassy Narrows residents claiming that it is no longer a problem because mercury levels have fallen below the Health Canada safety guideline. Dr. Harada's study results "indicate that even being exposed under the safety guideline, if prolonged, it could cause Minamata Disease (chronic type)."