



Press Release

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Ronald Poltak	978-323-7929	rpoltak@neiwppc.org
Paul Miller	617-259-2016	pmiller@nescaum.org
Bill Cass	617-367-8558	wcass@newmoa.org

Northeast States Leading the Charge on Mercury Reductions

Today, the six New England states and New York State jointly submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) a cleanup plan under the federal Clean Water Act to further reduce mercury entering into the states' waters from a range of pollution sources. The cleanup plan is called the Northeast Regional Mercury Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL).

A mercury TMDL is a calculation of the maximum amount of mercury that a water body can receive and still meet regional water quality standard. Under the Clean Water Act, EPA has 30 days from the states' TMDL submittal to either approve the plan or disapprove it and set its own limits.

The primary concern associated with mercury is human exposure through consumption of fish contaminated with this toxic metal. The mercury that accumulates in fish primarily originates from air emissions; sources include the burning of coal at power plants, burning of mercury-containing products at municipal waste combustors and medical waste incinerators, burning of sewage sludge that contains mercury from dental uses, and releases attributable to broken mercury-containing products. Mercury that is released to the air returns to the land through atmospheric deposition and makes its way into water bodies. Once in water, bacteria convert mercury to a form that can accumulate in fish and other aquatic organisms. If mercury accumulation reaches levels that pose risks to human health, states must issue fish consumption advisories to provide information to their residents on the amount and types of fish that are safe to eat.

Throughout the Northeast, elevated levels of mercury in certain fish species have resulted in fish consumption advisories in every state covering more than 10,000 lakes, ponds, and reservoirs and over 46,000 miles of rivers. Because of these concerns about mercury, in 1998 the New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers Committee on the Environment established a goal of virtual elimination of all in-region anthropogenic sources of mercury. The declaration of this need spurred action across the Northeast United States, and programs to eliminate mercury from air, waste, and water began in earnest. The TMDL is just one of many steps the states are taking to address mercury.

The TMDL calls for a 98 percent reduction in anthropogenic mercury sources from both sources within the Northeast states and sources outside the region. Because the majority of mercury in the region originates from out-of-region sources, the Northeast states are asking for more stringent federal controls on mercury emissions.

In conjunction with the states' mercury cleanup plan, the Northeast states' environmental agencies, in coordination with their partner interstate organizations, NEIWPC, NESCAUM, and NEWMOA,* are issuing a report that documents progress to date within the region on lowering mercury emissions and releases. The report, *Northeast States Succeed in Reducing Mercury in the Environment*, highlights innovative and effective programs that are resulting in tangible and positive improvements in reducing mercury in the environment. The successes demonstrate in-region progress as well as show how other areas outside the region can achieve comparable gains.

Specific examples in the report include:

- Between 1998 and 2002, mercury released to the air from municipal waste combustors and medical waste incinerators in the region decreased by 85 and 95 percent, respectively, due to states setting stricter mercury emission limits than required by federal law. As a result, sources in the New England states reduced their mercury emissions by almost 8,000 lbs.
- State legislation enacted to restrict the sale of mercury-containing products prevented 14 tons of mercury from entering the environment in the period from 2000 to 2006.
- More than half of the dental offices in the region have installed equipment to separate mercury from dental waste so it can be disposed of safely. With this success, the states have set higher targets: the new goal is to have mercury separation equipment in 75 percent of dental offices by the end of 2007, and 95 percent by the end of 2010.

EPA's New England office has supported and collaborated on many of these state programs and the virtual elimination goal. "The New England states have shown the rest of the nation that the discharge of mercury to the environment can be reduced substantially, and that these reductions make a huge difference for the environment and public health," said EPA Regional Administrator Robert Varney. "We applaud our states for working individually and together with EPA New England to reduce the amount of mercury released into our water, soil and air."

While the Northeast states will continue to implement existing mercury reduction programs and look for new ways to prevent mercury contamination, complete success cannot happen until out-of-region sources commit to comparable reductions. David Littell, Commissioner of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, has been working closely with the interstate organizations on the TMDL and other mercury reduction efforts. "All Northeast states have adopted stringent emission limits on our coal power plants, we've eliminated mercury in almost all of our products, and taken it out of waste streams in many ways," Littell said. "In short, while we continue to bring our own house in order, we would like these same efforts pursued in the rest of the country. Our fish won't be safe to eat until we do."

Both the *Northeast Regional Mercury Total Maximum Daily Load* report and *Northeast States Succeed in Reducing Mercury in the Environment* report are available online at www.neiwpc.org/mercury.

* NEIWPC, NESCAUM and NEWMOA are respectively the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission, Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, and Northeast Waste Management Officials' Association.