

News Release

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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 TODAY

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

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

Download the newly translated report at FreeGrassy.org, available in English the first time.

See next page for demands and supporting statements.

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 5% to 95%, and a sacred food staple was lost.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin 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 only \$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, still births, and early childhood deaths from mercury poisoning.

Health Canada stopped testing for mercury in Grassy Narrows residents claiming that it was 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)."

Demands:

1. Governments must come to the table to make things right about the mercury;
2. Acknowledge mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows, strengthen Health Canada mercury safety guideline to protect all people;
3. Permanent monitoring through funding for Grassy Narrows run environmental center, training for youth;
4. Stop the mills from polluting the water and air;
5. Restore Grassy Narrows control over Grassy Narrows Territory.

Supporting Statements

"How can we have trust, and reconciliation when the government of Ontario walks away from their responsibility to make things right about the mercury pollution they permitted," asked **Grassy Narrows Chief Simon Fobister**. "Our grassroots people are still suffering the affects on their health and livelihood from this poison in the water. It is no wonder they are out there on the blockades. The province needs to come back to the table to resolve the mercury issue."

"It is heartbreaking to hear the stories from the community members whose health has been affected by the mercury poisoning," **Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse** said. "The people of Grassy Narrows have raised their concerns for forty years now, only to have these concerns fall on deaf ears. The health of these people, the waters, the lands and all the beings are too important to be ignored. It is time for the government to listen to the voices of First Nations and to their constituents."

"The mills take from our forest, and then give us back disease and sickness and death," explained **Judy Da Silva, a grassroots mother and blockader from Grassy Narrows**. "Our people have suffered for 40 years from mercury poisoning, and now this sickness is being passed on to our children in the womb. We must stop the mills from destroying our forests, our water, and our culture for the survival of all people."

“When I was pregnant I couldn’t afford to buy food at the store, so I ate what my grandfather brought home – mostly fish,” explained **Sherry Fobister, a young Grassy Narrows mother**. “Now both my children are sick with strange illnesses, just like their cousins. I myself have tremors and numbness, but I don’t qualify for compensation. Sometimes I can’t afford to bring my kids to Winnipeg for treatment. I want everyone in Grassy Narrows tested.”

“The tragedy at Grassy Narrows will be repeated unless we recognize that access to clean water is a human right,” said **Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians**. “There is a world-wide scarcity of water now, even in Canada there is massive pressure to turn water into a commodity to be bought and sold and controlled by corporate interests. I call on the McGuinty government to learn from the people of Grassy Narrows and protect the water for future generations.”

“Ontario plans to export clean water technology while Native communities continue to suffer from the contamination of their rivers, lakes, and water sources,” said **David Sone of Earthroots**. “There is a two tier system here where industry gets subsidies while sick people in Grassy Narrows wait 40 years for justice that has yet to come. Worse yet, Ontario has compounded the damage the mercury has done to Grassy Narrows by trying to force clear-cut logging and mining on the community. ”

“The people of Grassy Narrows have faced decades of exploitation of their traditional lands, waters, and resources at great cost to their health and livelihoods,” said **Freya Putt, Forest Campaigner at Greenpeace Canada**. “It is past time that the Ontario government recognized the rights of the Grassy Narrows First Nation and other First Nations to determine how and when their lands and resources are used.”

“There was a time when ‘as long as the rivers flow’ meant forever to First Nations people,” said **CUPE Aboriginal Council Co-chairs Joanne Webb & Vince Musson**. “Today flowing rivers do not mean forever. Our water can no longer guarantee life for people or ecosystems. Today we must stand together to protect the water that all living things depend on.

The members of the CUPE Ontario Aboriginal Council believe that nature is being transformed by corporate agendas and the impact on First Nations people is profound. Nowhere is this more evident than for the Grassy Narrows Asubpeeschoseewagong Anishinabek.

Forty years after the Wabigoon River was contaminated with mercury the rivers are still flowing, but for the people of Grassy Narrows the waters are no longer life giving, they are toxic.”

"As Chief in the 1970's, when the government first negotiated with us, I said that Grassy Narrows requires the control over our land and resources for our people to recover from the devastating impacts of mercury pollution on our health, our culture, and our economy. This is still true," said **Grassy Narrows Chief Simon Fobister**.

