

RELEASE

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Experts: River of poison in Grassy Narrows can be cleaned

One meal of Grassy Narrows fish has up to 150x safe daily Hg dose recommended by US EPA

Press Conference at Queen's Park Press Gallery, May 30, 9:45am

Toronto - One of Canada's most notorious toxic dumping sites can be cleaned revealed a team of mercury remediation experts in a report released publicly today. Multiple generations of Grassy Narrows people suffer from the debilitating health impacts of mercury poisoning including loss of vision, imbalance, and trembling. Nothing has been done to clean the Wabigoon River in over 45 years since a paper mill dumped 9,000 kg of mercury, a potent neurotoxin, into the waterway that provides fish and water to Grassy Narrows First Nation and their neighbours.

"My expert opinion is that mercury levels in Grassy Narrows' fish can be brought down to a safe level using quite benign techniques," says Dr. John Rudd, the report's senior author and a key research scientist for the government's English-Wabigoon River Steering Committee in the 1980's. "Without remediation the fish will likely stay unsafe to eat for the foreseeable future. Fish in Clay Lake on the Wabigoon River remain among the most contaminated fish in Canada."

. The river has shown little to no improvement in the last thirty years according to the report. To this day, mercury is continuing to spread downstream into the lower lakes of the river system.

Fishing is central to Grassy Narrows' culture and provided near full employment until the mercury dumping was exposed.

"This report is the first serious look at cleaning up the Wabigoon River and downstream lakes since the 1980s," explained professor Brian Branfireun of Western University, a mercury expert not involved in writing the report. "Using the newest and best available scientific information, the authors outline several strategies that have been shown to reduce mercury levels in fish in other mercury-contaminated sites that could work here. It is clear that natural recovery is not an option if the consumption of fish from this system is a goal for this generation."

Written by three respected mercury experts, the report recommends a series of steps that would accelerate the recovery of the river and allow Grassy Narrows to safely practice a cultural and commercial fishery. The commercial fishery for walleye has been closed since 1970, and predatory fish in most tested locations near Grassy Narrows remain elevated in mercury and unsafe for pregnant women and children. In some locations fish are unfit for any human consumption.

“It is shocking that this river remains so highly contaminated after more than four decades,” said Professor Miriam Diamond, an environmental scientist at UofT not involved in the report. “One meal of Clay Lake walleye contains up to 150 times the safe dose of mercury recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. That could cause serious lifelong harm to a fetus or child at a critical stage in their development.”

The report notes that the government has not monitored mercury levels in the Wabigoon River water or sediment since the 1980s and that the official strategy of Monitored Natural Recovery has failed. It also says that current monitoring of the decommissioned chemical plant in Dryden is not sufficient to rule out ongoing mercury leaks from the site of the dumping in the 60s.

“In 1984 my colleagues and I reported to the government that Grassy Narrows’ fish would remain contaminated for generations if the river was not cleaned up,” said Dr. Rudd. “Our recommendations to clean the river were not followed and our troubling prediction has proven correct.”

“We recommended how to clean-up the river after our studies were completed in the 1980’s,” said Dr. Rudd. “More than 30 years later, after much further research, I’m even more convinced that these remedies will work.”

CONTACT

647-550-7882

For copies of the report, high res photos, and B-roll, contact:
riverrun2010@gmail.com

For more information: FreeGrassy.net