



Brussels, 12 March 2010

**Environment and Health NGOs'ⁱ recommendation:
support amendment 541 about toxic mercury in fish,
ENVI Committee report on the proposed food information to consumers**
[First reading vote in ENVI, 16 March 2010 – Sommer report]

The Health and Environment NGOs welcome the Commission's proposal on an EU regulation on the provision of food information to consumers.

Our interest in this report concerns the information consumers will receive about the presence of toxic mercury, and in particular **amendment 541** concerning labelling of the **mercury content** of *meat from large predatory fish or foodstuffs containing meat from these fish species*. The amendment would add: *'contains methylmercury- not recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding women, women who might become pregnant, and children'* to be added immediately after the list of ingredients. In absence of a list of ingredients, the statement should accompany the name of the food.

Mercury is highly toxic, causing damage to the human nervous system at even relatively low levels of exposure.ⁱⁱ It persists in the environment for long periods, and can be transformed into methylmercury, its most toxic form. It accumulates in the bodies of wildlife and becomes more concentrated as it moves up the food chain. *Mercury also accumulates in human bodies* and readily passes through both the placenta and blood-brain barriers. It poses a particular risk to pregnant women and young children who eat contaminated fish, especially the **largest, oldest predatory fish** at the top of the fish food chain. This is why *the Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection* has recommended that women who are breastfeeding or who are or might become pregnant should limit their consumption of large predatory fish, such as swordfish, shark, marlin, pike and tunaⁱⁱⁱ.

The EU Commission Extended Impact Assessment on Mercury noted evidence of continuing exposures at or above the recommended 'safe' levels among some of the European population, especially in Mediterranean countries and the Arctic^{iv}. In the USA, where exposure levels may be comparable, a study^v estimates that **between 300,000-600,000 babies born each year suffer from intelligence loss due to methylmercury exposure**, which costs an estimated 8.7 billion dollars a year in lost earnings to the economy.^{vi}

We therefore urge you to support amendment 541.

Providing health information to fish consumers regarding the presence of methylmercury in certain fish should be a priority to help women and people caring for children to make informed decisions. Targeted consumer safety labelling is an appropriate approach in this case.

The US, several Member States and other countries, have already issued specific advice to vulnerable groups to limit or abstain eating certain species of fish in order to reduce methylmercury intake. This proposed amendment is in line to the EU Strategy on mercury (January 2005), aiming to reduce mercury levels in the environment and human exposure, especially from methylmercury in fish.^{vii} The European Parliament supported this Strategy in March 2006^{viii}.

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ⁱ Environmental and Health NGOS include

The European Environmental Bureau, (EEB), www.eeb.org, is a federation of more than 145 environmental citizens' organisations based in all EU Member States and most Accession Countries, as well as in a few neighbouring countries. These organisations range from local and national, to European and international. The aim of the EEB is to protect and improve the environment of Europe and to enable the citizens of Europe to play their part in achieving that goal.

The Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG), (www.zeromercury.org) is an international coalition of more than 80 public interest environmental and health non-governmental organizations from 42 countries from around the world formed in 2005 by the European Environmental Bureau and the Mercury Policy Project. ZMWG strives for zero supply, demand, and emissions of mercury from all anthropogenic sources, with the goal of reducing mercury in the global environment to a minimum. Our mission is to advocate and support the adoption and implementation of a legally binding instrument which contains mandatory obligations to eliminate where feasible, and otherwise minimize, the global supply and trade of mercury, the global demand for mercury, anthropogenic releases of mercury to the environment, and human and wildlife exposure to mercury.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) (www.env-health.org) raises awareness of how environmental protection improves people's health, and works to strengthen European policies. We do this by creating better representation of expertise and evidence from the health community in decision making processes. HEAL a diverse network of over 60 citizens', patients', health professionals', women's and environmental groups. Our members include international and Europe-wide organisations, as well as national and local groups.

ⁱⁱ World Health Organization (WHO), 1991, Environmental Health Criteria 118, Inorganic Mercury, WHO, Geneva.

ⁱⁱⁱ EFSA communication on methylmercury in fish, 2004,

http://www.efsa.europa.eu/cs/BlobServer/DocumentSet/note_methylmercury_af09_doc0602_en1.pdf?ssbinary=true

^{iv} Extended Impact Assessment – Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Community Strategy Concerning Mercury, SEC(2005) 101, p.5

^v Mount Sinai study: Public health and economic consequences of Methyl Mercury Toxicity to the Developing Brain, February 28, 2005 <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/members/2005/7743/7743.pdf>

^{vi} US EPA <http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/fish/advice/mercupd.pdf>

^{vii} EU Strategy on mercury, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52005DC0020:EN:NOT>

^{viii} <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=EN&pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2006-0078+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>