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Fishing Opener Raises Questions About Polluted Fish Groups Call for Reductions in Mercury from Coal Plants

MINNEAPOLIS, MN. MAY 7, 2002 --- Minnesota's annual Walleye fishing opener this Saturday should be a wake-up call for the urgent need to reduce mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants and other top industrial sources, says the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the Sierra Club and Clean Water Action Alliance. Coal-fired power plants are the top emitters of mercury into the environment. Environmental mercury accumulates in fish where people generally have their greatest exposure to it. Mercury is a heavy metal that is toxic to brain tissue and can cause learning and behavior difficulties particularly in children born to women who eat fish contaminated with it.

"While the size of the Governor's catch might capture the headlines at this year's opener, serious mercury contamination of the state's fish should be of greater concern to parents and children," explained Kathleen Schuler, environmental scientist at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

Today, the Minnesota Department of Health is issuing a new advisory telling women of childbearing age and children to seriously limit their consumption of many fish, including tuna and other marine species as well as some freshwater fish. The advisory can be downloaded at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/fish/index.html>

Although some fish can be a good source of protein and beneficial fats, fish in Minnesota contain potent toxins like mercury, PCBs and dioxins to varying degrees. Since mercury builds up in the food chain, it can concentrate in predator fish, like walleye and northern pike, to levels as much as a million times higher than in lake water.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates 1.6 million women and children in the U.S. are exposed to unsafe levels of mercury through fish consumption. According to the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 10 women of childbearing age have levels of mercury in their bodies, which could harm a developing fetus.

"This fishing opener should be a real wake-up call," said Paula Maccabee, Coordinator of the Sierra Club Air Toxics Campaign. "If we want to make sure our fish are healthy to eat, we need to cut back on mercury air pollution that settles on our lakes and contaminates our fish." Coal plants in Minnesota are responsible for 40 percent of the mercury air emissions, according to Maccabee. "One coal-fired power plant, like the Riverside plant in Minneapolis, can emit as much mercury every year as breaking open 44,500 mercury thermometers. Re-powering with natural gas, like Xcel Energy proposed last week, is a critical part of any strategy to make eating our fish safe again."

Diana McKeown, Energy Program Coordinator for Clean Water Action Alliance, emphasized that current Minnesota policies have fallen short in addressing the problem. "Even the PCA Commissioner," notes McKeown, "has admitted Minnesota's voluntary program to reduce mercury emissions from industry has been a dismal failure." Said McKeown, "Minnesotans are organizing to make sure that coal plants, mines and waste incinerators cut down on mercury pollution, clean up the rain and make it healthy for us to eat what we catch all summer long."

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