

CURE FOR ICE CREAM HEADACHE: SHUT DOWN DIOXIN SOURCES

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Former chemical industry lobbyist Steven Milloy and Dr. Michael Gough gave the folks at Ben & Jerry's a real "ice cream headache" last week. They presented findings at an international symposium on dioxin, one of the most toxic compounds ever studied. Their research found that a sample of Ben & Jerry's ice cream contained levels of dioxin that exceeded the Environmental Protection Agency's "virtually safe" dose.

However, Milloy and Gough's test revealed nothing new. Their findings are consistent with the latest scientific research, and the EPA's most recent conclusions: dioxin is present at elevated levels in our food - particularly in dairy products, but also beef, fish, and other animal products.

As dioxin is released into the environment from incinerators and industrial water discharges, it falls on farmland and enters lakes and streams. Dioxin exists at high levels in food because it bioaccumulates, or builds up, in the fat of animals as it works its way up the food chain.

We all have dioxin levels stored in our own body fat – some of us at alarmingly high levels. In fact, half of the dioxin we eat today will still be in our bodies seven to ten years from now, even if we could somehow avoid ingesting any more in the meantime. What's more, the amount of dioxin in the fat of many Americans is close to levels that have caused adverse health effects in lab animals.

According to the EPA, more than 95 percent of dioxin exposure comes from what we eat. Sadly, *all* ice cream contains dioxin, not just Ben & Jerry's. So do meat, fish and dairy products. Even more tragically, so does breast milk. This contamination comes courtesy of all of the incinerators, chlorine-bleaching pulp mills, polyvinyl chloride plastic manufacturing plants and other industries that release it into the environment.

Milloy and Gough chose to test Ben & Jerry's ice cream because the company has been outspoken in calling for the end of dioxin releases into the environment. Despite a strong international scientific consensus to the contrary, Milloy and Gough believe dioxin is relatively harmless and that little needs to be done to address human exposures.

Most experts, however, agree that dioxin is a serious human health threat. For example, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, which is part of the World Health Organization, declared dioxin to be a "known human carcinogen" in 1997. The U.S. EPA followed suit this

past June. Studies of Vietnam Veterans (who were exposed to dioxin in the defoliant Agent Orange) and their families have linked dioxin exposure to spina bifida in veterans' children. Infertility, endometriosis, learning disabilities and immune system problems have also been linked to dioxin exposure.

Ben & Jerry's has done the right thing by joining forces with public health advocates, environmentalists and other food producers to confront the industries that produce dioxin. They have also begun using unbleached packaging that does not create dioxin when it is made. In doing so, they are doing all *they* can to minimize dioxin in their product, because no one knows how to remove dioxin from food once it is there. The dioxin in the cow's milk, and thus in the ice cream, comes not from farmers, but from Milloy's former lobbying clients -- and other chemical, paper and waste disposal companies.

The notion of dioxin prevention is nothing new. In 1992, the International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes, led by conservative Republican Gordon Durnil, called for the virtual elimination of dioxin from the Great Lakes Basin because of concerns about dioxin's threat to human health. The Philippines has adopted a ban on incineration throughout the entire country because of concerns about dioxin and other pollutants.

Countries around the world have been working toward phasing out dioxin emissions as part of an historic international treaty on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). The US government could play a leading role in the upcoming POPs negotiations, by strongly supporting the phase-out of dioxin production. Strong policy recommendations from the EPA and the new presidential administration would be critical to U.S. leadership in dioxin elimination under the POPs treaty. There are many opportunities to make real changes to get dioxin out of our food.

We should learn from the lesson of strontium 90 in milk. In the 1950s, Barry Commoner demonstrated that nuclear fallout from atomic testing was contaminating milk around the country with radioactive strontium 90. That research compelled the government to halt atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons in order to protect the milk supply. Now we must do the same to halt further dioxin contamination. We must support family farmers, food producers, and food companies that don't want dioxin in their food. Milloy and Gough's research provides yet another reminder of the urgent need to address dioxin problems at their source -- before they become part of the food chain.