Press Release from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

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Borders Are No Barrier to Dioxin Emissions, NAFTA Commission Study Shows

Ag Group: Time to Shut Down Sources to Protect Food At Home and Abroad

(Minneapolis -- October 3, 2000) Today the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC) released a study showing that dioxin emissions from point sources in Mexico, the United States and Canada is contaminating food and the environment in the Canadian Arctic. The incinerator operated by Xcel Energy (formerly Northern States Power) in Red Wing has been identified as one of the major sources of this contamination.

NACEC hired Dr. Barry Commoner and his staff at the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems (CBNS) to track dioxin emissions from more than 40,000 identified dioxin point sources in North America to Nunuvut, a region in the Arctic. To do so, they used a computer model created by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

"Two things are particularly compelling about this study," said Jackie Hunt Christensen, Food Safety Project Director at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis. "First of all, it emphasizes the fact that dioxin is a global problem and needs to be addressed as such. Secondly, the report demonstrates what Dr. Commoner and CBNS were saying five years ago: as dioxin travels these long distances, food and people are contaminated along the way."

In 1995, Dr. Commoner released his first analysis using the NOAA model and even then showed how airborne dioxin emissions followed wind patterns from west to east, often landing on grazing lands of pastures. Once eaten by unsuspecting animals, such as cattle or dairy cows, the dioxin becomes part of the animal's fatty tissues. Thus, when people eat meat, fish, or dairy products, they are also being exposed to dioxin. In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says that more than 95 percent of human exposure to dioxin comes from food, mostly through animal products. (Fruits and vegetables also absorb very small amounts of dioxin.

Dioxin is known to cause cancer in humans. It has also been linked to endometriosis, infertility, birth defects, learning disabilities, immune system suppression and many other health problems.

"Just as the people of Canadian Arctic do not intentionally put dioxin in their food, neither do American farmers," continued Christensen. "This report makes it clear that the only way to clean up our food supply, in the Arctic and in Minnesota, is to eliminate the sources of the dioxin emissions."

The NACEC report noted the 1996-1997 emissions from the Red Wing incinerator, which burns "refuse [garbage]-derived fuel" for energy. The plant has upgraded its pollution control equipment,

as mandated by new regulations, but this equipment simply means that more dioxin is concentrated in the ash, which is sent to landfills, and less comes out the stack.

"Less is not good enough," said Christensen. "According to EPA's draft dioxin reassessment, most people already have nearly the amount of dioxin in their bodies that causes health problems in lab animals. Some people have already passed that threshold. For this reason, we have to stop burning our trash and develop other policies to prevent additional dioxin production."

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy has been promoting resilient family farms, rural communities and ecosystems around the world through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy since 1986. IATP has been involved in efforts to get dioxin out of the food supply since 1994. To learn more about IATP, visit our web site: https://www.iatp.org/

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