

## **Australia signs the New Global Mercury Treaty: 3 Things That Need to Happen Now**

October 14, 2013

The signing of the world's first international mercury treaty by delegates from more than 100 countries, including Australia, should spur three key actions to reduce total global mercury pollution and tackle Australia's mercury contamination.

"The mercury treaty is a victory because it represents a global consensus that mercury pollution presents a serious threat to human health and the environment. Now we need to get to work," said Lee Bell, Senior Researcher for the National Toxics Network (NTN) who has just returned from meeting victims of mercury poisoning in Minamata, Japan.

"Some treaty provisions are legally-binding obligations and others require governments to "endeavour" to take action. This means that each government has a moral, if not a legal commitment to fully implement all treaty provisions."

NTN recommends three key actions as work on the treaty gets underway.

**1. Sign and ratify the mercury treaty:** Ratification means updating country laws on mercury pollution. Fifty countries must ratify the treaty for its provisions to begin. Rapid ratification means addressing mercury pollution sooner.

**2. Identify sources and make a plan:** Actions to reduce mercury pollution require knowledge of mercury sources and a plan to address them. Key global mercury sources include coal-fired power plants and artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM). Australia has significant mercury contamination arising from historical and current industrial processes, energy production and gold refining.

**3. Apply the lessons of the Minamata tragedy:**

- Apply the precautionary principle: Already we are beginning to see signs of mercury poisoning in gold mining communities; in women, children and men. We do not need to wait 20 years, as they did in Minamata, to confirm what we are seeing. The cost of inaction is too high.
- Understand and act on mercury use in cities, towns and nations. A single industrial source caused the Minamata tragedy, but mercury sources throughout the world can be widely dispersed. Inventories will reveal priority sites for action and banning mercury trade will stop the export of harm.
- Do not wait 20 years to manage contaminated sites. The cleanup of contaminated sites in Minamata began 20 years after the problem was discovered. That was too late.

If we do not act quickly, the legacy of the current worldwide gold rush will be thousands of highly contaminated sites and devastated communities around the world.

“The Mercury Treaty is particularly connected to Minamata because it specifically calls on governments around the world to learn and apply the lessons from the Minamata tragedy to prevent mercury poisoning in the future,” said Lee Bell. “Unfortunately, the original tragedy is still not resolved.”

In Minamata resolution means recognition and compensation for all victims as well as clean-up of all contaminated areas, including the 1.5 million cubic meters of toxic mercury waste “temporarily” stored at the Eco-Park. It also means implementing the principle of “polluter pays” and conducting a comprehensive, independent, systematic health study in impacted areas.

“All around the world there are beautiful places like Minamata where serious toxic pollution problems happen quietly over time. In the future, my hope is that the Minamata name will not only be associated with a tragedy, but also become a positive model for carrying out the Mercury Treaty by finally resolving the world’s worst case of mass mercury poisoning,” Bell concluded.

The National Toxics Network is Australia’s peak dealing with toxic pollution from chemicals and toxic metals NGO with over 300 members groups. NTN is also affiliated with the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN) an international NGO comprised of 700 organizations in 116 countries that work to minimize, and whenever possible, eliminate, hazardous, toxic substances internationally and within their own countries. IPEN has been actively involved in the three-year mercury treaty negotiation process.

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