

**UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues**  
**Third Session, May 10 – 21, 2004**  
**Agenda Item 4, Health**  
**"Health of Indigenous Women and Girls: A Right Denied?" Panel**

International Indian Treaty Council  
Read by Sherri Norris

Hawey, Greetings! My name is Sherri Norris I am a member of the Osage Nation and here to represent the International Indian Treaty Council.

Thank you for this opportunity to introduce the Mercury Tribal Health and Environmental Justice Program and offer PF members our requests for recommendations.

150 years after the California Gold Rush the toxic legacy of mercury is a significant threat to Indigenous Peoples of California to whom fish have always been and continue to be a vital part of their traditional, cultural and spiritual practices. Within only 40 years it is estimated that 3-8 million pounds or more of mercury, used in gold reclamation, was lost in Northern California turning more toxic as methyl-mercury over time.

Methylmercury is a deadly neurotoxin that accumulates in women's bodies before and during pregnancy passing through the mother's placenta into the developing fetus, through breastmilk into nursing children, and into small children who eat fish resulting in permanent physical and mental learning disabilities; or in higher exposures, birth defects and mental retardation.

The US has allowed corporations to alter official reports to minimize the threat of mercury, lowered mercury emissions standards and is allowing industries 15 years to pollute before regulation will begin. In the US it is estimated that 630,000 babies are born each year with mercury poisoning, it is unclear how many of these are Indigenous children, but subsistence fishing societies, such as Indigenous Peoples in California, are at highest risks.

Although Mercury is no longer used for gold reclamation in the US, mercury is used in more than 3,000 industrial processes globally and in gold mining purposes in other countries throughout the world including but not limited to Brazil, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. The majority of emission from coal-fired power stations and incinerators can be transported globally to regions far from the emissions source. This is a global issue.

As a result, we urge the Permanent Forum to present these recommendations to the following UN agencies and bodies:

- 1) That UNEP continue and if possible accelerate its work to create a global agreement for the elimination of mercury.
- 2) That the work by the UNEP Governing Council, insure the direct participation of

Indigenous Peoples, including those in California, through invitation, travel expense and housing in all discussions on all levels, including the Regional Awareness Raising Workshops (next scheduled for May 31, 2004 in Anglophone Africa).

3) That the mandated research through UNEP include abandoned mines in North America, including California.

3) That the UNEP mandate to encourage states to compile transparent, accessible, timely and cultural relevant reports by region, include of the territories and watersheds of Indigenous Peoples and enlist UNESCO, UNICEF, UNIFEM and FAO in this goal.

4) We further call upon the Permanent Forum to recommend that the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food conduct an assessment of the dangers of Mercury contamination with emphasis on Indigenous Peoples' health, right to cultural survival, and "Right to Food" with a special focus on Indigenous women and children.

5) That the Permanent Forum request reports from all agencies on the status and advances of the recommendations listed above before the next PF session in 2005.

This project was created in partnership with the Pit River Nation to launch a "Right to Know" and cleanup campaign to empower Indigenous Peoples to make informed decisions while maintaining traditional practices.

"The Mercury Contamination and Community Health in Northern California" report was created to give clear information of the current state of mercury in fish in California and answer some of the most commonly asked question posed to us in our fieldwork. We hope it will be a powerful tool to make healthy decisions, build alliances for mine cleanup and to end the use of mercury and other toxic chemicals in mining projects world-wide.

On behalf of our future generations we thank you for your consideration and kind attention.

Thank You. Gah-ko-nah.

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**Appended: Tentative schedule for the UNEP workshops in the different regions:**

Central America and the Caribbean – Postponed ,  
Asia and the Pacific –April 26-30, 2004 – Bangkok, Thailand;  
Anglophone Africa – May 31 to June 4 – Pretoria, South Africa;  
Central and Eastern Europe – 2 or 3rd quarter in 2004 – Not yet identified;  
South America –September 13-17 – Argentina;  
Commonwealth of Independent States – 2 or 3rd quarter – Kiev, Ukraine;  
West and Central Asia – October 11-15 – Kuwait;  
Francophone Africa – November 23-26 – Senegal

The UNEP report, its conclusions and recommendations will be submitted and reviewed for further action at the 23rd session of the UNEP Governing Council, February 21-25, 2005.

For additional information about UNEP and the scheduled Mercury Awareness Raising Workshops, and to coordinate efforts to participate contact Tony Gonzalez at: [tonyg@treatycouncil.org](mailto:tonyg@treatycouncil.org) , or the IITC Mercury Tribal Health and Environmental Justice Program at [lakota@treatycouncil.org](mailto:lakota@treatycouncil.org) , or call the IITC San Francisco office at 415 641-4482 or visit our website: [www.treatycouncil.org](http://www.treatycouncil.org)