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Natural Solutions for Island Resilience

The Pacific environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.

Twenty Fifth SPREP Meeting of Officials

Majuro, Marshall Islands
30 September – 2 October 20014

Agenda Item 10.3.2: Improved Regional Management of Mercury

Purpose:

1. To seek approval of the Secretariat prioritising efforts to improve the regional management of mercury and mercury-containing products and wastes.

Background:

2. Mercury is a naturally occurring element and can be released into the air, soil and water through weathering of rock containing mercury ore or through human activities such as industrial processes, mining, deforestation, waste incineration, and burning of fossil fuels.

3. Mercury can also be released from a number of mercury-containing products, including dental amalgam, electrical applications (e.g. switches and fluorescent lamps and bulbs), laboratory and medical instruments (e.g., clinical thermometers and barometers), batteries, seed dressings, antiseptic and antibacterial creams, and skin-lightening creams, many of which are found and used in our region.

4. In addition, artisanal and small-scale gold mining is practiced in a number of PICs where elemental liquid mercury is used to extract gold from river sediments. These practices are at best unregulated and the miners are not protected from the release of the volatile mercury vapour during the process.

Effects of mercury exposure:

5. Mercury and its various compounds have a range of serious health and environmental impacts when released into the environment.

6. Human exposure to mercury can affect fetal neurological development and has been linked to lowered fertility, brain and nerve damage, and heart disease in adults who have high levels of mercury in their blood. Other impacts of mercury exposure include impaired thyroid and liver function, kidney damage and damages to the digestive system and behavioural and physiological symptoms.

Environmental Concentrations of Mercury:

7. Research has shown that anthropogenic emissions and releases of mercury have doubled the quantities of mercury in the top 100 meters of the world's oceans over the last 100 years.

8. A 2013 Global Mercury Assessment reported that current anthropogenic sources are responsible for about 30% of annual emissions of mercury to air. Another 10% comes from natural geological sources, and the rest (60%) is derived from 're-emissions' of previously released mercury in surface soils and in oceans. Most re-emitted mercury was originally derived from anthropogenic sources.

9. Reducing current anthropogenic sources is therefore vital to reduce the amount of mercury within the environment.

Global Action on Mercury

10. The significant adverse effect of mercury on human health and the environment has prompted regular discussion of the need to protect human health and the environment from the releases of mercury and its compounds. Many of our region's Ministers and Senior Officials have been part of these discussions.

11. In February 2009, UNEP[1] agreed to the elaboration of a legally binding instrument on mercury, which could include both binding and voluntary approaches, together with interim activities to reduce risks to human health and the environment.

12. The global, legally binding treaty on mercury, the Minamata Convention, was formally adopted as international law on the 10th October 2013, in Minamata City, Japan.

Recommendations

13. The Meeting is invited to:

- **note** the regional importance of improved mercury management;
- **direct** the Secretariat to pursue a regional program on the environmentally sound management of mercury and mercury-containing products and wastes;
- **encourage** Members to consider becoming signatories to the Minamata Convention; and
- **encourage** Members to pursue national initiatives in the environmentally sound management of mercury and mercury-containing products and waste as part of their overall programs for chemicals and hazardous waste management.

16 August, 2014

[1] Through the UNEP GC-25/GMEF in its Decision GC 25/5,