Dear Governors:

For over twenty years, the nation has been struggling to address the consequences of toxic metals exposure in countless communities. Lead contamination in our communities has required millions of dollars in clean-up, health surveillance, and public education. Our delay in responding aggressively to lead pollution decades ago meant millions of children suffered the debilitating effects of lead exposure and poisoning.

We hope we have learned from this unfortunate public health crisis, and can prevent repeating the same mistakes when it comes to dealing with another toxic heavy metal: mercury.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin polluting our nation’s rivers, lakes, streams, and coastal waters after a century of burning fossil fuels for energy and incinerating trash. Fish inhabiting over 50,000 water bodies are contaminated, as well as the birds and mammals that depend on those fish like the loons of Maine and the Great Lakes. Today, according to EPA over 1.6 million American women and children are at risk for mercury poisoning. Native American tribes, subsistence fishing groups like the Hmong, recreational anglers, and people who have a preference for eating large amounts of fish are all at risk from consuming mercury-contaminated fish.

What makes mercury a particularly troubling environmental pollutant is that it is highly toxic even in extremely small amounts. It builds up in the food chain and can persist in the environment for decades. Mercury deposition at an annual rate of 1/70th of a teaspoon can contaminate a 25-acre lake to the point where the fish are unsafe to eat. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that every year in the U.S. over 150 tons of mercury are released into the air (although this figure likely underestimates the actual amount being released).

Like lead, children are at the front lines of this emerging public health and ecological crisis. Even before drawing their first breath, a child’s brain may be permanently damaged from being exposed to mercury in utero at critical times of development from the mother eating contaminated fish.

Already, health departments in 40 states have issued advisories covering over 50,000 water bodies warning people to restrict their consumption of mercury-contaminated fish. Over 60 prominent physicians nationwide—many experts on the effects of metals on children—have written an open letter to decision makers calling for policies to eliminate, to the greatest extent possible, man-made mercury releases.

In addition to posing a threat to human health, polluted waters that contaminate fish also can affect local economies that depend on the fishing and tourist industries. As you know, these industries are not insignificant. In fact, revenues generated in the U.S. for fishing related activities, ranging from equipment and guide fees to food and lodging, totaled over $37 billion in 1996. Concerned about mercury’s impact on the national tuna industry, the U.S. Tuna Foundation (whose members include
household tuna names like StarKist, Bumble Bee and Chicken of the Sea) recently adopted a national resolution urging governments to reduce and ultimately eliminate mercury emissions.

The U.S. EPA has been slow to address this public health problem in a comprehensive and thorough manner. In addition, only a handful of states, most notably the Northeast states and Minnesota, have taken the needed step of developing binding policies to curb continued mercury releases.

As individuals and organizations concerned about mercury contamination and its threat to people and wildlife, we call on you and your Administration to:

1. Commit to reducing mercury emissions by 50 percent by 2005 (over 1995 levels, the latest year for which data are available), and virtual elimination by a date certain.
2. Develop an agency plan to meet those goals by targeting each sector, including electric utilities.
3. Develop a comprehensive state inventory of mercury emission sources.
4. Develop a policy prohibiting the incineration of mercury-bearing waste.
5. Work with your Legislature to pass comprehensive mercury legislation that mandates product labeling and recycling and eventual phase-out of non-essential uses of mercury; and imposes emission reductions and monitoring and reporting requirements on coal-fired utilities and manufacturers.
6. Work with your Health Departments to develop a public education/outreach plan on the state's fish consumption advisories.
7. Ensure routine (2x/year) monitoring on mercury levels in fish.

We also call on you to:

- demonstrate leadership on this important public health issue within your Governors’ Conference, and advocate for the adoption of regional goals and action plans;
- support your Congressional members in their attempts to move national mercury policy; and
- commit to holding a session on mercury—the extent of the problem and the challenges that lie ahead—at the next meeting of the National Governors’ Association.

Mercury contamination and human exposure needs to be a priority issue for you and your Administration. In addition to being a risk to human health, mercury-tainted fish can have economic consequences as well. Sport and commercial fishing industries depend on the supply of safe fish, and so does the tourism industry. Meaningful steps needs to be taken now to protect public health and preserve an important food source that we all depend on.

For the sake of our children and future generations, we look to you for your leadership on this important issue.

Sincerely,

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<td>Mothers &amp; Others for a livable Planet</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
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<td>Robert Lepley</td>
<td>Citizen Action of NYS</td>
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<td>Babette Linfield</td>
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<td>Michael Lopushinsky</td>
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Submitted by Clean Air Network on behalf of the above listed groups. CAN is an alliance of over 900 local, state, and national organizations committed to working for air quality that promotes good health and preserves the environment. For more information, contact CAN at 202-289-2403.