# Dioxin, Incinerators and Breast Milk

*Appeared in* OJIBWE AKIING, *May 31, 2000.*

Violet Yeaten, an Inupiat, is an environmental specialist for her remote village of Port Graham in Alaska. For her, just eating is now increasingly dangerous, as pollutants from the United States and elsewhere end up in her ecosystem, and subsequently her body. Some "80% of our people's diet is made up of our traditional foods. On an average, our people eat between 12 and 15 fish meals per week. When we eat the whole fish, we consume all the concentrated chemicals."

Just east of her, Inuit communities in the newly created Canadian province of Nunavut find they are similarly challenged. A recent report notes, "Although there are no significant sources of dioxin in Nunavut or within 500 kilometers of its boundaries, dioxin concentrations in Inuit mothers' milk are twice the levels observed in southern Quebec." That's the kicker: Mother's milk is sort of the sacred essence of motherhood, yet today, this milk—and even the placentas themselves—are becoming increasingly contaminated with pollutants, compromising the health of families and those yet to come.

The toxic substances found in the Arctic are known as Persistent Organic Pollutants, or POPs, and represent a dangerous combination of pesticides and unwanted byproducts of production such as dioxin and industrial chemicals. The chemicals are long lived and have a tendency to migrate towards colder regions in the north through air and water currents. The chemicals accumulate in the body's fat tissues, and become concentrated higher in the food chain. The chemicals are of special risk to children, whose delicate systems are in the primary stages of development.

Ironically, it is the emissions from two almost adjacent incinerators that have found their way directly to the Arctic. With the help of new, sophisticated tracking mechanisms, it has been discovered that it is indeed the residues of our own garbage in the breast milk of these women.

Using a sophisticated model developed by the federal government, a research team studied sources. Researchers from the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, or NACEC, studied some 44,000 sources of dioxin in North America. The researchers tracked them into the pristine ecosystem of Nunavat. Nunavut, an almost entirely Inuit region of Canada, is considered an ideal test ground, since there are no significant sources of dioxin in the territory, nor within 300 miles of its boundaries.

Of particular interest, in the top ten sources of dioxin found in the Arctic, was that coming from an Xcel Energy–owned incinerator at Red Wing, Minnesota, with a similar incinerator just south at French Island in LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

Overall, U.S. facilities, primarily medical waste and garbage incinerators, were found in the NACEC study to contribute between 70 and 82 percent of all dioxin deposited at the eight test locations in Nunavut. Canadian facilities, by comparison, contributed 11 to 25 percent, and Mexican sources, largely from backyard burning of trash, contributed between 5 and 11 percent.

There are a number of initiatives underway to reduce the toxic emissions released in both Canada and the U.S., including new EPA regulations, which should reduce dioxin emissions by 90 percent from municipal waste incinerators and 95 percent from medical incinerators. At some incinerators, however, like the incinerator at French Island, there has been a bit of dodging of the more stringent regulations. Until October of this past year, the EPA allowed the French Island Incinerator at LaCrosse to be on sort of an honor system of reporting how much dioxin-producing garbage it was burning. Then, a tip off by Midwest Environmental Advocates pushed the government to take a closer look. That look caused the EPA to redesignate the incinerator

as a large incinerator—meaning that it should comply with more stringent emissions rules by December of 2000.

Not surprisingly, the federal government has not enforced the law and Xcel has not brought its incinerator into compliance. In response, Midwest Environmental Advocates has put the company on notice that it will sue them if they continue to violate the law. The Ho Chunk Nation has also weighed in on this issue. On April 3, the Ho Chunk Legislature passed a resolution calling on the Environmental Protection Agency to require Xcel's facility to close until it reduces its toxic emissions.

This past December, other moves were also underway. A delegation of Native people from North America traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa, seeking to address the international transfers of toxins through a United Nations Global Treaty. Over 120 countries, including the United States, began final negotiations on a global and legally binding treaty for the elimination of toxic substances. The final signing of the treaty is scheduled for May of this year in Stockholm, Sweden.

The Native representatives included Violet Yeatin, Evon Peter, Charlotte Caldwell, and Tom Goldtooth from the Indigenous Environmental Network. All went to discuss the more than 100,000 chemicals that have been introduced globally into the environment since the 1940s, and the disproportionate impacts of these contaminants in Native communities engaged in subsistence cultures. The United Nations Environmental Program mandated the world's governments to create a treaty banning the worst of the pollutants, and today that treaty focuses on twelve of the most deadly chemicals, including PCBs, DDT, and other pesticides. Dioxin is one additional byproduct of industry, which, since 1985, has been considered by the EPA the most potent carcinogen ever tested in a laboratory.

Evon Peter of Arctic Village, Alaska was one of the delegates saying, "Our land is a sinkhole for these contaminants." The short- and long-term solution is known. "Elimination is the only solution to stop the northern flow of these chemicals, which are disrupting the delicate balance of nature here in the Arctic," ex-

plains Pam Miller, director of Alaska Community Action on Toxics, based in Anchorage.

Over 250 tribes have approved an NCAI resolution supporting the elimination of the so-called POPs, and over forty tribal governments have passed resolutions and subsequently strong treaty negotiations calling for the elimination of POPs. The treaty signing is considered by most activists, including Pam Miller, as an unprecedented opportunity to stop the northward flow of chemicals.

There was, after intense negotiations, quite a set of agreements by those parties participating. Included in the final wording was the goal of elimination of POPs as a centerpiece, utilizing strong precautionary language in various forms in the preamble, objectives, and elsewhere, obliging developed countries to provide financial support for less developed countries in POPs elimination, and stressing pollution elimination as well as other essential components. This treaty must now be approved by the U.S. Congress, hopefully prior to the May meeting in Stockholm.

Meanwhile, back in the Great Lakes region, we have our own quandary. Fish from Lake Michigan show levels of dioxin more than 100,000 times higher than the surrounding water, plants and sediment. However, two thirds of the dioxin exposure to the public comes from eating milk, cheese, and beef, a result of cows eating contaminated food crops. The pulp and paper industry ranks as the leading source of dioxin exposure to the public—a direct consequence of the use of chlorine bleaching in their processes. Second after that is waste incineration—ironically, Minnesota burns three million tons a year, more than any state except New York. Those waste incinerators are spewing out dioxin that ends up in pastures and on food crops, which eventually end up in our own bellies.

Back to the problems of Xcel and the incinerators at Red Wing and French Island in LaCrosse. So now with the wonders of modern technology, we find that we can spew poison to the remotest regions of the globe, and can actually test the breast milk of women in Nunavut and find our own garbage. What about the women in

LaCrosse, Red Wing, or Minneapolis? Thus far, we've not taken much interest in such sophisticated testing, but considering all the dairies, cheese, and food that is produced in the St. Croix River Valley, one might take a wee interest in our own contamination.

There are, of course, solutions. Elimination is at the front end of the proposals. That would mean that proposals to build more incinerators should be canned—in fact, since 1985, over 300 separate proposals to build incinerators have been defeated or put on hold. There are a few myths that are beginning to unravel, which likely contribute to the lack of ambition in building the incinerators. For instance, incinerators do not make waste disappear—they reduce it to ash and atmospheric emissions, both of which are still incredibly dangerous. In fact, up to 40% of the waste is still around. Nor will the incinerators solve our landfill problems. As far as medical waste (actually the highest source of dioxin), only 10% or less of a typical hospital's waste stream is potentially infectious, according to Washington-based Essential Action. And that can be sterilized with heat or microwaves. In the end, the production of dioxin from the incineration of the waste may be causing more health problems than the waste itself.

On the other hand, there is the slightly more challenging, and less based on denial, set of solutions—those would be recycling, re-using, and eliminating many of the things we send flying to the dump and to the incinerator.

Far away, in Johannesburg, in the halls of Congress, and in Sweden, there will be work underway to negotiate this Treaty on Persistent Organic Pollutants. I am hopeful it is positive work. Here at home, our own incinerators need a clean up. That would be our work.