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April 28, 2009

Arctic Peoples Threatened by Toxic Chemicals
Will U.S. Honor International Treaty?
Indigenous Arctic delegation to travel to Geneva
to urge protection from toxic chemicals

(Anchorage, AK) **The fourth meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme's Conference of the Parties of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants will convene from May 4-8 in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss restricting and phasing out the world's most dangerous chemicals. Representatives from Indigenous communities of the Arctic will attend to support a transformation of the previous U.S. position on the treaty, which has created obstructions for public health protections in response to chemical industry lobbying. The Indigenous Peoples will also urge the Parties to the Convention to integrate a comprehensive human rights framework through the United Nations and the implementation of the Stockholm Convention.**

Some Arctic Indigenous populations have shown "levels of contaminants in blood and breast milk [that] higher than those found anywhere else on the Earth." The Arctic acts as a "cold trap" for contaminants transported via atmospheric and oceanic currents. Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) accumulate and some may increase in the Arctic food web. Indigenous communities of the north are reliant on a traditional diet of foods from the land and ocean for their physical, cultural, and spiritual sustenance. These communities are at particular risk from contaminant exposures. In some cases, there are significant exceedances of national and international health standards for exposure to such chemicals as PCBs.

"The Indigenous Arctic peoples are suffering the most from these chemicals," says **Vi Waghiyi**, a Yupik woman from St. Lawrence Island in the northern Bering Sea, "because the chemicals – DDT, endosulfan, lindane, perfluorinated compounds and toxic flame retardants, to name a few – are long lasting, and drift North on wind and water currents from where they are applied in the Southern latitudes. That means these chemicals are also in our traditional foods and affecting our health and the health of our children."

Exposures to POPs chemicals are associated with harmful health effects at extremely low doses, including immune system suppression, learning and developmental disabilities, diabetes, impairment of reproductive health, and certain cancers. Levels of PCBs and other contaminants are elevated among some Arctic Indigenous populations and have been found to be within the range associated with effects on learning and immune function. A previous study demonstrated that the Yupik people of St. Lawrence Island have significantly higher body burdens of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) than the background populations in the U.S. and Canada. Studies have confirmed that Arctic populations relying on marine foods have exposure levels to POPs and methyl mercury related to the amount of traditional foods eaten and at levels associated with adverse health effects. The Alaska State Department of Public Health conducted a study in 2008 that documents the highest birth defect rates in the United States, double the national average. A 2007 report by scientists from the United Nations Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme show a gender imbalance in Arctic communities in Greenland, Canada and Russia due to elevated levels of chemicals there.

The Preamble of the Stockholm Convention recognizes the special vulnerability of Arctic Indigenous Peoples and states: "*Acknowledging that the Arctic ecosystems and indigenous communities are*

particularly at risk because of biomagnifications of persistent organic pollutants and that contamination of their traditional foods is a public health issue.”

“For the past eight years, the U.S. has refused to ratify the Stockholm Convention, the international treaty that demands a global phase-out of these dangerous chemicals,” according to **Andrea Carmen**, Executive Director of the International Indian Treaty Council. “The chemical industry has spent millions lobbying Congress to delay responsible ratification and implementation with public health in mind. This has cost human lives and the health of those living in the Arctic. Even when Congress did try to ratify it, they put so many restrictions on for the benefit of the chemical industry it would have been a useless act. Time is running out and the U.S. Congress has got to take a stand and fight for the lives of the contaminated people and environments of the North. They must ratify the treaty with the Precautionary Principle standards intact. We are traveling to Geneva to inform the other nations that for us this is not an abstract issue—we need action now to stop the production of these chemicals that affect our health and the health of future generations. These chemicals harm everyone—we believe it is our responsibility to protect the health of all peoples of our Mother Earth.”

Many participants in the Stockholm Convention are paying close attention to the U.S. involvement in the upcoming meeting, and are hoping the new U.S. administration will take a stand to protect the Indigenous people of the North.

Members of the Indigenous Delegation to the Stockholm Convention Conference of Parties (COP4) available for interviews include:

- **Andrea Carmen, Yaqui**, Executive Director, International Indian Treaty Council; 907-745-4482
andrea@treatycouncil.org
- **Jane Kava, Inupiat**—St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, Mayor of Savoonga; 907-984-6614
kavajane@yahoo.com
- **Margaret Celeste McKay, Métis**—Native Women’s Association of Canada; 204-237-1555
celeste@mcmckay.ca
- **Vi Waghiyi, Yupik**—St. Lawrence Island, Alaska; 907-222-7714; 907-841-5163 vi@akaction.net
- **Mike Williams, Yupik**—Native Village of Akiak, and Chair of the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council; 907-765-7426 mwilliams19522004@yahoo.com

Also Available for Interviews

- **Shawna Larson Carmen**, Environmental Justice Director at Alaska Community Action on Toxics and staff member of Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL). She is Ahtna Athabascan (Indian) from Chickaloon Village on her father’s side, and Supiaq (Aleut/Eskimo) from the village of Port Graham on her mother’s side. 907-222-7714; cell (907) 841-5163 shawna@akaction.org
- **Joseph DiGangi**, Ph.D. Senior Scientist, Environmental Health Fund. 312-566-0985
digangi@environmentalhealthfund.org
- **Pamela K Miller**, Executive Director, Alaska Community Action on Toxics. 907-222-7714, cell 907-242-9991, pkmiller@akaction.net
- **David O. Carpenter**, MD, Director, Institute for Health and the Environment, University at Albany, 518 525-266, carpent@uamail.albany.edu

Resources:

United Nations Environment Program Stockholm Convention

<http://chm.pops.int/>

Alaska Community Action on Toxics

www.akaction.org <<http://www.akaction.org>>

Indigenous Environmental Network

www.ienearth.org

International POPs Elimination Network

www.ipen.org <<http://www.ipen.org>>

Alaska newborns at higher risk for defects

DOUBLE: All races of children born here exceed national average.

<http://www.adn.com/life/health/story/466924.html>

Man-made chemicals blamed as many more girls than boys are born in Arctic

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/sep/12/gender.science.news>

Additional information:

The Stockholm Convention, signed in 2001, is a global legally-binding treaty now ratified by 150 nations to protect human health and the environment from persistent organic pollutants or POPs. POPs include the organochlorine pesticides; DDT, endrin, dieldrin, aldrin, chlordane, toxaphene, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene, mirex; and the industrial chemicals and by-products; PCBs, dioxins and furans. During the upcoming Conference of Parties, the participating nations will decide whether to add new nine new candidate POPs chemicals such as lindane (an insecticide used in agriculture and in pharmaceutical head lice treatment products), perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS—used in industrial applications such as semi-conductor manufacturing, metal plating, and upholstery), and three toxic brominated flame retardant chemicals (additives to consumer products such as furniture and electronics). The Convention mandates Parties to make decisions about the listing of new chemicals “in a precautionary manner.