

Global agreement on mercury in sight

It is not only Icelandic volcanic ash that blows freely across national borders. The same certainly applies to mercury, one of the world's most dangerous environmental toxins. We in the Nordic countries must therefore work together to secure an ambitious global agreement on regulating the use and emission of mercury. The Nordic countries have played a leading role in initiating this crucial work, and the foundation for such an agreement will be laid at the UN Mercury Conference in Stockholm in June.

In the Swedish encyclopaedia, *Nordisk Familjebok*, from 1909, we read that head lice can be treated by rubbing mercury and fat into the skin. Today we know better – we are aware that mercury is harmful to both health and the environment. On home territory, the Nordic countries have deliberately limited or banned the use of mercury, not least in different products, but keeping our own house in order is not enough. Most of the mercury that falls in the Nordic region originates in other countries far from our shores. In order to reduce contamination of the Nordic environment, measures must therefore be taken at a global level, through a mercury agreement that applies to all countries.

Mercury is proven to have many harmful effects on our health. Mercury can be converted to the highly toxic form, methyl mercury, which then accumulates in animals such as fish and marine mammals. The population of the Arctic regions, whose diet is largely based on food from the sea, is particularly vulnerable. Research has shown that babies of women in the Arctic, who are exposed to food with high mercury content, can be born with damage to the central nervous system. This can lead to, for example, impaired learning ability.

Many Nordic initiatives relating to mercury are carried out under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the intergovernmental organisation. The Nordic countries have a common view of the mercury problem. We have taken powerful action in the global arena that, in 2009, helped unite the world's countries to agree on negotiations about a binding global agreement on limiting the use of mercury. This initiative lies within the framework of UNEP, the UN environmental programme. UNEP has now appointed the Nordic countries hosts of the first negotiation meeting.

Naturally, if the process is to be successful, all countries must make undertakings and accept responsibility. The Nordic countries are therefore contributing fully to promoting commitment – we are doing this by producing documentation and reports that can stimulate the global incentive to achieve fruitful cooperation on reducing mercury emissions at the point of origin.

The Mercury Conference in Stockholm, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, will attract hundreds of decision-makers, experts and officials from governments and international organisations, as well as representatives of environmental movements and not-for-profit organisations from all around the world. The conference will offer the Nordic countries a unique opportunity to be seen on the global stage and to exert practical influence. Cooperation on the mercury issue is an excellent example of how we in the Nordic countries can work together and successfully exert an active influence on global processes. We will continue to drive this issue and pave the way for an ambitious global mercury agreement that can be ratified in 2013.

Nordic Environment Ministers
Karen Ellemann, Denmark

Paula Lehtomäki, Finland
Annika Olsen, Faroe Islands
Anthon Frederiksen, Greenland
Svandís Svavarsdóttir, Iceland
Erik Solheim, Norway
Andreas Carlgren, Sweden
Katrín Sjögren, Åland