



DEFENDING WATER, DEFENDING RIGHTS

# “OUR PEOPLE ARE A RIVER PEOPLE”

## CANADA OWES GRASSY NARROWS A DEBT OF JUSTICE FOR DEADLY HARM FROM MERCURY CONTAMINATION

Mercury contamination of the English and Wabigoon river system poses a profound threat to the lives and culture of the people of Asubpeeschoseewagong Anishinabek, also known as Grassy Narrows First Nation. The federal and provincial governments have long known of these threats. Yet despite longstanding public demands for action led by the people of Grassy Narrows, little has been done to address, or even acknowledge the harm.

“OUR PEOPLE ARE A RIVER PEOPLE. WHEN WE FOUND OUT THE MERCURY WAS IN THE WATER IT HAD A REALLY DEVASTATING EFFECT ON OUR COMMUNITY.”

Judy DaSilva, Grassy Narrows

Fish found in the waters of Grassy Narrows have much higher levels of mercury than fish found elsewhere in Ontario. After reviewing provincial data, the *Toronto Star* concluded that an average meal of Walleye from Clay Lake near Grassy Narrows contains about 40 times the daily mercury exposure limit for women of child-



bearing age, pregnant women, and children, as recommended by Health Canada.

This kind of crucial health information has typically come to light only through the efforts of the community and investigative journalists, not the government.

Methyl mercury is extremely dangerous. The effects include accelerated aging, degenerating control over

how the body moves, damage to eye sight and the heart, and impairment of mental functions and brain development.

Once formed through the interaction of mercury with the natural environment, methyl mercury accumulates in the food chain, reaching dangerous levels in long-lived predatory fish. The health impacts for humans exposed to methyl mercury are cumulative. This means that for people who eat contaminated fish, even relatively low levels of contamination become more and more dangerous with each exposure. When pregnant women are exposed to mercury, their children are also at risk.

## **A DISASTER IGNORED**

The province of Ontario allowed a pulp mill to dump nine tonnes of mercury into the river system upstream from Grassy Narrows in the 1960s. According to a recent community-led health study, the poisoning of the river system has created one of the worst community health crises facing any community in Canada. Fish is central to the cultural and identity of the Anishnaabe people and a traditional staple of life for the people of Grassy Narrows. The contamination of fish imposes a dire choice between risking exposure to a deadly toxin or giving up a foundation of culture and subsistence that the community cannot afford to lose.

**FOR OTHER WAYS TO TAKE ACTION, PLEASE VISIT  
[WWW.AMNESTY.CA/DEFENDINGWATER](http://WWW.AMNESTY.CA/DEFENDINGWATER)**

The federal and provincial governments negotiated a limited compensation agreement two decades after the contamination of the river system. but never acknowledged that the people of Grassy Narrows had been poisoned by mercury or that there was an ongoing threat to their health. Most of the follow-up studies to monitor mercury in the environment and impact on community health have been initiated by the people of Grassy Narrows themselves.

The people of Grassy Narrows have never stopped speaking out for justice. Recently, through their efforts, the federal and provincial governments have both made important promises to finally clean up the river and ensure that the people of Grassy Narrows get the support they need.

## **ACT NOW**

Join with the people of Grassy Narrows in demanding that the federal and provincial governments keep their promises. Grassy Narrows can't wait for justice. The federal and provincial governments must commit to

- Fully implement the recommendations of the Grassy Narrows Community Health Assessment, including the need for food security programs that support cultural harvesting traditions, increased support for mothers, emergency and long-term programs for children and youth, and specialized care for community members suffering from mercury poisoning.
- Fully and fairly compensate all Grassy Narrows people for the impacts of the mercury crisis on their health, culture, livelihood, environment and Treaty rights.
- Swiftly implement existing commitments including the construction and operation of a Mercury Survivors Home and Care Centre, complete remediation of English and Wabigoon River system, and comprehensive reform of the Mercury Disability Board.

Please send a short, polite letter supporting these calls for justice to:

**Prime Minister Justin Trudeau**

Prime Minister's Office  
80 Wellington St Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

**Premier Doug Ford**

Legislative Building  
Queens Park, Toronto, ON M7A 1A1