

**CASTLE MOUNTAIN COALITION \* CHUITNA CITIZENS NO-COALITION  
COOK INLETKEEPER \* MEA RATEPAYERS ALLIANCE**

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**ALASKA PUSHES COAL PROJECTS DESPITE  
NEW FISH CONSUMPTION GUIDELINES FOR MERCURY**

ANCHORAGE, AK – The State of Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Health (HSS), released a report today detailing the amounts of methylmercury (MeHg) in Alaskan fish tissue, and recommending fish consumption levels for certain population segments. The Report highlights the important role fish consumption plays in a balanced diet, and focuses on data collected as part of the state’s ongoing fish monitoring program. Collected data shows that Alaska fish are beginning to show mercury levels that meet or exceed limits for unlimited consumption in select vulnerable populations (e.g. pregnant women). Based on the study results, Alaska fish appear to be some of the cleanest in the world, but the HSS Report sounds a cautionary note.

“Alaska’s fisheries are some of the healthiest in the world,” said Bob Shavelson, Executive Director of Cook Inletkeeper. “But with the state moving headlong into coal strip mines and coal-fired power plant development, we need to wake up to the fact that Alaskans eat a lot of fish, and mercury contamination from coal is not compatible with smart fish management.”

The largest single man-made source of mercury pollution is coal-fired power plants. Mercury is released into the atmosphere by the combustion of coal, then transported on a global scale through atmospheric deposition and ocean currents. Once in the water, mercury is converted into methylmercury where it can bio-accumulate more than a million-fold in the aquatic food chain. In January of this year, Governor Palin acknowledged that the leading source

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of methylmercury in Alaska was thought to be the “deposition of mercury from distant sources.”

Mercury is most harmful to vulnerable populations, such as fetuses, young children and pregnant woman, because it can cause developmental and neurological problems. According to the National Academy of Sciences, more than 60,000 children born each year may suffer learning disabilities due to mercury (National Research Council, 2000). Mercury affects the human nervous system, and has been linked to autism, Alzheimer’s disease, kidney damage, and increased risk of heart disease.

“The State of Alaska is rushing ahead to develop the massive Chuitna coal strip mine in Cook Inlet, just so we can ship coal to low-tech Asian power plants,” said Judy Heilman of the Chuitna Citizens NO-COALition. “But everything we know shows the main source of mercury in our fish is coming from Asia. So why is the state moving forward to destroy fish and game habitat in our backyard with a huge strip mine, and compounding the problem by putting our fish at risk of more mercury from coal?”

In addition to the proposed Chuitna coal strip mine, there are a host of additional coal projects slated for Alaska, including: coal leasing on Alaska Mental Health Trust Lands near Chickaloon; Matanuska Electric Association’s 100 MW coal-fired power plant in the Mat Su Valley; Homer Electric Association’s proposal to re-start the defunct and problem-plagued Healy coal-fired power plant; coal exploration near Point Lay as part of the Western Arctic Coal Project; and Agrium’s proposal to build a coal-fired power plant and associated coal-gasification unit at its Kenai fertilizer facility.

In addition to the mercury pollution associated with coal development and use, coal produces more greenhouse gases than any other fossil fuel. Because Alaska is feeling the disproportionate effects of climate change, Alaska coal development will aggravate an already serious problem. Coordinated efforts by the coal industry touting “clean coal” neglect the impacts of mercury and greenhouse gases on fisheries and human health. The groups are calling on Governor Palin to ensure adequate assurances are in place that greenhouse gases and mercury from coal development and combustion will not harm Alaska fisheries and the families and communities who rely on them.

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