

## Dioxin and breast milk: the French Island incinerator

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Hearings are underway on the Wisconsin French Island Incinerator. The public health impact internationally of this incinerator is significant. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should shut down the incinerator because of its long-term impact on public health internationally. The French Island incinerator's dioxin and that of Xcel's Red Wing incinerator are appearing in the breast milk of women thousands of miles away, endangering their health, and the health of their children. That is an unacceptable price to pay.

I have just finished breastfeeding my third child. After two years, that seems to be enough. I know, like most other women today, that breast milk is best for your baby. That would be, unless your breast milk is heavily contaminated with dioxin and other persistent organic pollutants.

Violet Yeaten, Inupiat, is an environmental specialist for her remote village of Port Graham in Alaska. Some "80 percent of our peoples' diet is made up of our traditional foods," Violet explains. "On 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 village, Inuit communities in the Canadian province of Nunavut find they are similarly challenged. A report by the North American Commission on Environment notes, "Although there are no significant sources of dioxin in Nunavut or within 500 kilometers of its boundaries, dioxin concentrations in Inuit mother's 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.

Using a sophisticated model developed by the federal government, researchers from the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC) studied some 44,000 sources of dioxin in North America. The researchers tracked the dioxin into the pristine ecosystem of Nunavut. An almost entirely Inuit region of Canada, Nunavut 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, among the top ten sources of dioxin found in the Arctic was that which came from an Xcel incinerator at French Island.

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 five and 11 percent.

What we know about the French Island incinerator itself is shocking. Xcel's facility has violated its permit for dioxin for the better half of the 1990s and still remains out of compliance with the Clean Air Act.

The Xcel incinerator put out 28 nanograms of dioxin in 2000, more than all facilities combined in the state of Illinois, and is the largest polluter in Wisconsin in terms of dioxin. Dioxin is considered by the EPA to be one of the most toxic chemicals ever created by humans. It is known to be a carcinogen having serious impacts on reproductive and endocrine systems and is, in all, a persistent pollutant that lasts for a long time in the environment.

It is not as if this has gone unnoticed. Both the Ho-Chunk Nation and Madison-based Midwest Environmental Advocates, as well as a host of other groups, have worked diligently to bring the incinerator and Xcel back into compliance with some semblance of environmental decency. It appears Xcel has found little reason to diminish its pollutants. In fact, they have increased. French Island's airborne emissions included 539,108 pounds of toxic chemicals in 2000, up seven percent from 1999 and up 51 percent from 1998.

Proposals by Xcel for the new Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources permit would only limit the pollutants when the corporation burns garbage, yet wood waste (about 97,000 tons a year of the stuff, all chock full of creosote) is one of the largest sources of dioxin.

Internationally, there has been an outcry for governments to curb and eliminate these lethal substances. Indigenous peoples have been immensely concerned, largely because our populations inhabit the arctic regions, the largest depository for these chemicals from airborne contamination. Over 120 countries, including the United States, began final negotiations on a global and legally binding treaty for the elimination of toxic substances. Among the "Dirty Dozen," as the worst pollutants are known, is dioxin, the most potent carcinogen ever tested in a laboratory. The treaty calls for its elimination. Known as the Stockholm Convention on

Persistent Organic Pollutants, the treaty now awaits ratification by the U.S. Senate.

So it is that with the wonders of modern technology, we can spew poison to the most remote regions of the globe. We can test the breast milk of women in Nunavut, and find our own garbage. What about the women in LaCrosse, the 5000 people who live on French Island, the people of Red Wing, or Minneapolis? Thus far, we've not taken much interest in such sophisticated testing, but considering all the dairy products, cheese and other foods that are produced in the Mississippi River and St. Croix Valleys, one might take a wee interest in our own contamination.

The solution to pollution is not dilution: it is elimination. The health risks posed by the French Island incinerator and the contamination of breast milk of women far away is appalling. Both the EPA and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources should fulfill their mandates and protect our health and the environment.

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