Canada's Report on Arctic Contaminants

The Canadian Arctic Contaminants Assessment Report will be released in early 1997 by the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The report summarizes the data collected over the past six years under the Canadian Arctic Environmental Strategy's Northern Contaminants Program. Information for the report comes from more than 100 Canadian participants in the Northern Contaminants Program, representing federal and territorial governments, northern aboriginal organizations, and universities. A "highlights" summary, directed towards the general public, also draws upon input from community participants. The participation of northern communities is a key component of the Northern Contaminants Program.

The report describes the extent of the problem in the Canadian Arctic and provides some comparison to other parts of the world. The report will discuss the sources of contaminants, pathways they follow to the Arctic, the geographic and the regional trends of contaminants and their impact on the ecosystem and human health. Looking forward, the report identifies where new research is most needed.

In Canada, the report and "highlights" summary will be distributed to northern organizations, libraries, schools, universities, communities, government agencies and key audiences south of 60°N. The report will also be circulated in the international scientific community, particularly among the circumpolar countries.

For copies of the report or for more information, please contact:

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State of the Arctic Environment Report due in June 1997

The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program's (AMAP) first "State of the Arctic Environment Report" will be published in 1997. Accompanying it will be the "AMAP Assessment Report", a scientific report. Both documents will be presented to Ministers responsible for the Arctic at their meeting in Norway in June 1997.

The AMAP was established in 1991 under the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS). Its mandate is to monitor the levels of contaminants in the Arctic and to assess their effects. Priority is given to persistent organic pollutants (POPs), certain heavy metals, radionuclides and, for Norway, Sweden and Finland, acids.

An international working group, consisting of representatives of the eight member nations of the AEPS, implements the AMAP. Canada chairs the Working Group until the end of 1997. Norway has provided a Secretariat. Several international organizations also contribute to the Working Group, as do the observer nations (Germany, Poland, the Netherlands and Britain).

As well as preparing its own national report on the state of its Arctic environment, Canada is also contributing to AMAP's report on the state of the circumpolar Arctic environment.

The AMAP is built, as far as possible, on existing national and international programs. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development coordinates Canada's contribution, which comes mainly from Canada's domestic Arctic Environmental Strategy (AES). All relevant government departments and agencies participate in Canada's contribution to the AMAP.

The involvement of northern indigenous groups is of paramount importance to the AMAP. The Inuit, Saami and Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North participate in the Working Group. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference and Saami Council have been involved in drafting sections of the reports, particularly those concerning indigenous populations and human health.

Looking North for Answers

by the Honourable John Fraser, PC, QC
Canada's Ambassador for Environment and Sustainable Development

Visitors to the Arctic are amazed by the natural state of this immense region of the Earth. People live in relatively small settlements, with few of the activities that we associate with environmental damage. Many Aboriginal people in the Arctic still rely on "country food." It is part of their cultures and is often the basis of a healthier diet than expensive food from the south can offer. Yet, the appearance of environmental purity is deceiving.

In some places in the high Arctic there is a brown smog called "Arctic haze," despite the lack of local pollution sources. Air and water currents have brought persistent organic pollutants such as PCBs and dioxins into the region, resulting in concentrations of PCBs in both adults and children that frequently exceed acceptable levels.

Between October 8 and 10, I had the opportunity to take part in a unique conference in Iqaluit, Northwest Territories, that addressed these and related issues. Iqaluit will become the capital of the new Nunavut Territory in 1999. "For Generations to Come," was sponsored by the Canadian Polar Commission, Canada's national advisory agency on polar research issues. The goal of the conference was to bring together Canadian expertise on northern contaminants, to examine the effectiveness of current strategies, to review government policies on these contaminants, and to evaluate Canada's contribution to international contaminants activities.

At one level, the conference offered a chance to identify concrete ideas on steps to remove or reduce the presence of contaminants in the Arctic environment. Moreover, it was a chance to discuss the effectiveness of existing environmental policies in Canada, such as the Arctic Environmental Strategy. In any case, it is crucial that we assess how effective such policies have been in reaching the goals set out five or six years ago, and identify where we could go from here, both domestically and internationally.

However, this was less a conference about science or policy than a conference about people. In fact, in this conference, as well as at three previous regional forums, people at the community level across Canada's Arctic discussed the issues as they saw them. The uncertainty that many Northerners feel about contaminants in their environment and their concerns about how research had been done in the past came through clearly.

Scientists are finding that they must communicate their findings, clearly and in a way that crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries. Only then can people decide how safe it is to eat seal meat, or fish in a particular lake. Research agencies are beginning to listen to Arctic residents who face potential risks. They are working together to identify the most important gaps in our knowledge. They are setting up research priorities and ways of doing research that reflect the concerns of Northerners.

The conference made it clear that we still do not know enough about the level of contaminants and their effect on the Arctic environment and wildlife. We need to learn more about trends and risks. We need to know more about the scale of effects.

Action to reduce the impact of these and other pollutants on the people of the North is more than a question of environmental and human health. It has a strong moral quality. The preservation of Aboriginal cultures in the Arctic depends in large part on the preservation of the traditional food supplies, so much a part of those cultures. These people want to maintain their traditions. They deserve to be heard as the world sets its environmental priorities. Through institutions such as the Arctic Council, the UN Environment Program and the work of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, they should be!

Skookum's North