

# An Arctic thank you for UN action against toxins that accumulate in traditional food

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Sometimes when you live in a small, remote town you need support beyond your community to take care of your family and well-being. Savoonga is a traditional Yup'ik community on St. Lawrence Island in the northern Bering Sea, just 40 miles from the Chukotkan Peninsula of Russia. For much of the year we are surrounded by sea ice. Like our traditional Siberian relatives, we rely on bowhead whale, walrus, seals and other customary foods for most of our diet. But, recently, we relied on the peoples of Ghana, South Korea, El Salvador, Brazil, Switzerland, Norway, and over 80 other nations to support our health. Together, our work improved health globally, through a United Nations vote that banned the chemical pentachlorophenol.

Pentachlorophenol, or PCP, now joins the list of chemicals banned under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, known as the POPS Treaty. More familiar names already subject to the treaty include DDT, PCBs, and dioxin. The world is a healthier place for it.

Persistent organic pollutants are chemicals that persist in the environment and **bio-accumulate** through the **food web**. They contaminate our human blood and breast milk without our consent, and are associated with a range of harmful health effects including learning and developmental disabilities, endocrine disorders, and cancers.

Accumulation of POPs in northern latitudes is a well-documented phenomenon. Prevailing ocean and wind currents carry contaminants into the Arctic where they are subsequently

trapped by the cold climate. As early as the 1970s, DDT and other persistent pollutants were detected in Arctic species including polar bears, whales, and fish.

These dangerous contaminants accumulate in the marine mammals that are so important to Arctic survival and central to the diets of Arctic indigenous peoples.

Whether in Russia, Alaska or beyond, Arctic peoples suffer many health disparities including high rates of cancer and birth defects.

The International POPs Elimination Network found adverse impacts on women's reproductive health and on newborn children among Russian Arctic indigenous people, even with relatively low levels of POPs in their blood. Although Arctic children live very far from where these chemicals are produced, we know the recently banned pentachlorophenol is found in our traditional foods and in our bodies. These pollutants are known to pass from mother to child through breast milk.

The Stockholm Convention preamble acknowledges "Arctic ecosystems and indigenous communities are particularly at risk" and "contamination of their traditional foods is a public health issue." In fact, the discovery of PCBs in the breast milk of Arctic mothers at levels up to 10 times higher than in women living in lower latitudes was one of the original motivations for creating the Stockholm Convention to reduce and eliminate the burden of these harmful chemicals worldwide.

While the delegates from far-flung nations of every possible climate showed leadership by globally banning PCP, there is much more to do.

The United States is one of only a handful of nations which have not signed the Stockholm Convention, and so is not bound by this latest ban. The U.S., along with Canada, remains the highest user of this toxic chemical.

Once used broadly in agriculture, PCP was already banned in many countries because of its high toxicity. It is now mostly used to treat utility poles. Less dangerous, modern alternatives exist. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should take this opportunity to rise to the standards set by the rest of the world by phasing out the use of PCP.

I proudly traveled as far as I could imagine from my Bering Strait home to Geneva, Switzerland to represent Arctic indigenous peoples seeking to ban this chemical. I know my gratitude is shared by my Russian indigenous colleagues from across the Bering Strait who face similar health disparities, but were denied visas and unable to participate.

For the health and well-being of our indigenous peoples, all peoples of the earth, and future generations, I would like to offer a thank you to everyone who helped to ban this unnecessary and dangerous, toxic chemical. I can't possibly express this in each of your languages. So please accept this instead.

also at [http://cdn7.iitc.org/wp-content/uploads/News-Release-ACAT-and-IITC-COP7-5-18-15fin\\_web.pdf](http://cdn7.iitc.org/wp-content/uploads/News-Release-ACAT-and-IITC-COP7-5-18-15fin_web.pdf)

Alaska Community Action on Toxics and the International Indian Treaty Council played a key role in this decision of the Stockholm Convention Conference of the Parties (COP7), making the scientific and human rights case for a global ban on pentachlorophenol and two other industrial chemicals. The delegates of the Stockholm Convention also supported international bans on two other industrial chemicals that harm the global environment and human health: chlorinated naphthalenes and hexachlorobutadiene.

“We commend the global community for this important decision which will help ensure that the Indigenous Peoples and the traditional foods on which they depend are protected against toxic pentachlorophenol and the other industrial chemicals,” said Pamela Miller of Alaska Community Action on Toxics.

Pentachlorophenol is a toxic pesticide used in wood treatment of utility poles. Pentachlorophenol is a persistent and ubiquitous contaminant found in the breast milk, blood, amniotic fluid, adipose tissue, and seminal fluid of people throughout the world, including Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. This chemical is associated with adverse health effects including damage to the developing brain and nervous system, impairment of memory and learning, disruption to thyroid function, immune suppression, infertility, and increased risk of certain cancers such as non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

“This is a significant victory for our communities that are already experiencing health disparities associated with chemical exposures,” states Vi Waghiyi, a Yupik mother and grandmother from Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island and Environmental Health and Justice Program Director with Alaska Community Action on Toxics. “We feel an extreme urgency to prevent harmful exposures to toxic chemicals such as pentachlorophenol because we have a cancer crisis in our communities. It is so important for us to be present

1

and speak out where these decisions are being made and to inform delegates about the health and human rights implications of their decisions.”

The Global Indigenous Caucus included representatives from the Arctic, North American, Latin America and the Pacific regions. Rochelle Diver, who participated in the COPs representing the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) and her own Nation,

Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa believes that Indigenous Peoples, Nations and organizations from the US and Canada played a pivotal role in achieving the global ban of pentachlorophenol and the other chemicals. Ms. Diver stated: “The resolutions and letters we received that called on the US and Canada to support the global ban of pentachlorophenol were key factors in achieving this victory. The US and Canada are the two largest users of pentachlorophenol, and they changed their original positions and did not oppose the listing of this toxic chemical for a global ban as a direct result of Indigenous Peoples’ active engagement leading up to and during the COPs.”

The Indigenous Caucus presented resolutions and letters to the delegates of the Stockholm Convention from the Assembly of First Nations, Treaty 6 First Nations, Curyung Tribal Council, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Native Village of Diomedes, Native Village of Elim, Native Village of Gambell, Native Village of Mekoryuk, Native Village of Wales, and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission.

The meetings of the three international chemicals conventions, the Stockholm, Rotterdam, and Basel Conventions, convened in Geneva from May 4-16 with approximately 1,200 delegates from 171 countries. During the meeting, India surprisingly rejected the findings of the Stockholm Convention’s own scientific expert committee in which they participated. Switzerland triggered the voting procedure – the first in the history of the Convention.

Ninety-four countries voted in favor of global prohibition of pentachlorophenol; two opposed; and eight countries abstained. Alaska Community Action on Toxics and International Indian Treaty Council are participating organizations in IPEN, a global network of over 700 public interest organizations in 100 countries working to eliminate toxic substances.

International Indian Treaty Council: [www.iitc.org](http://www.iitc.org)

