

MEDIA ADVISORY

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State Adopts Aggressive Bay Mercury Clean Up Plan

(Sacramento, CA) July 18, 2007 – The State Water Resources Control Board yesterday unanimously approved a strong framework to clean up mercury in the San Francisco Bay. The Bay has become so highly contaminated with mercury that the State was required to create the clean up plan under an emergency provision of the federal Clean Water Act.

“Mercury is a toxic heavy metal that accumulates in the muscle tissue of fish, marine mammals, birds and humans,” says Dr. Gina Solomon, Senior Scientist for NRDC. “It’s a potent neurotoxin that can damage the brains of children and developing fetuses and is linked to heart disease in adults. Species at the top of the food web face the greatest risk because mercury concentrates as it moves up the chain.”

While upstream unremediated gold mines are addressed by the plan, modern-day sources such as oil refineries will have to clean up their mercury pollution as well. Recent evidence shows that oil refineries may be responsible for a large share of the Bay’s mercury problem through aerial deposition.

Under the Bay clean up plan, all sources of mercury – including oil refineries and municipal waste water treatment plants – will be compelled to reduce their mercury pollution to the Bay. Environmental groups advocating for a tough final plan (including Baykeeper, Clean Water Action and Natural Resources Defense Council) say the final approved version contains stronger protections for public health than earlier versions.

“Every little bit of mercury that enters the Bay is potentially toxic,” said Sejal Choksi, Program Director for Baykeeper. “So this is a good day for the health of the Bay because the final plan holds every current-day source of mercury, including industry and municipal waste water plants, accountable for their contribution and compels a reduction in their mercury pollution.”

“Until the mercury is cleaned up, however, people who fish from the Bay for survival are at especially high risk for severe exposure – as are people who eat large high-end fish like tuna and swordfish,” said Andria Ventura of Clean Water Action. Under the clean up plan the local agencies would support efforts to educate at-risk communities about safer food sources and train medical workers to recognize and treat signs of mercury poisoning.

Founded in 1989, Baykeeper is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the water quality of the San Francisco Bay for the benefit of the fish, wildlife and human communities who depend on it. Baykeeper uses advocacy, science and the courts to hold polluters accountable and ensure that our clean water laws are enforced.

