



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 6, 2009
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State contaminants workshops in Fairbanks, Anchorage start this week

Participants to contribute to strategy for protecting Alaskans and their environment from exposure to contaminants

(Juneau, AK) The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is co-hosting two information gathering workshops this week. The goal of the Alaska Contaminants Monitoring Strategy workshops in Fairbanks and Anchorage is to engage scientists, subsistence consumers, academics and members of the public interested in the presence of persistent organic pollutants, heavy metals and emerging contaminants in Alaska's environment. Comments from participants will help shape a strategy for protecting Alaskans and their communities.

Global atmospheric conditions, weather patterns and ocean currents serve to transport contaminants emitted across the northern hemisphere and concentrate them in the North Pacific and Arctic Oceans. They are incorporated into the food chain and can pose a threat to fish, wildlife and humans. Contaminants include metals such as mercury and a variety of organic compounds such as flame retardants, dioxins and pesticides. Exposure can cause effects such as altered growth and development, decreased resistance to disease and increased cancer risk.

"Protection of human health and the environment is our overall vision. Collaborating with others interested in this topic will ensure our efforts reflect the current science and existing needs so that we can better answer the ultimate question: Are subsistence resources safe to eat?" said DEC Commissioner Larry Hartig.

"It is imperative we improve our understanding of sources, transport, fate and effects of these pollutants. Information exchange, identifying research needs and getting input from subsistence users will help us understand what we need to do," said DEC Environmental Health Director Kristin Ryan.

This week's workshops are being held at the University of Alaska Fairbanks on Tuesday, July 7 and at the State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Lab in Anchorage on Thursday, July 9. They are part of a multi-year process to develop an overall contaminants monitoring strategy for Alaska. The state of Alaska, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the University of Alaska and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium are working together to spearhead this initiative. Comments and ideas will be sought through a variety of mechanisms with these workshops starting the public input process. The effort will culminate in a summit during the fall of 2010. The summit will highlight the strategy recommendations and promote exemplary research in this area.