



Minamata Convention on Mercury and Pesticides

The objective of the Convention is to protect human health and the environment from emissions and releases of mercury from human activity.

What is the mercury, and what are its impacts on human health?

Mercury is a naturally occurring element that can be dangerous if released into the environment. It persists in the environment, and accumulates in the food chain. Human exposure can be through ingestion of seafood and freshwater fish, emissions from coal-fired power stations and metal smelters, application of mercury-containing pesticides on sugarcane and disposal of mercury containing products such as used light tubes, thermometers or dental amalgam.

High levels of mercury exposure can cause mental retardation, damage to lungs and the central nervous system, kidney and heart disease, infertility, digestive and immune problems and foetal developmental defects such as the loss of IQ.

Mercury has been found in higher than average levels on the Great Barrier Reef. It can affect coral fertilisation and metamorphosis, causing coral bleaching and death.

What is the Minamata Convention?

The Minamata Convention addresses mercury releases through its lifecycle: mining, import and export, manufacture into products, emission and releases, contaminated sites, waste management, recovery and reuse.

Photo: Young sugar cane sprouting on a property near Ayr in northern Queensland © Department of the Environment and Energy

Australia signed the Convention in October 2013 and is now considering ratifying the Convention and being bound by its requirements.

Mercury released from pesticides

Shirtan Liquid Fungicide contains mercury, and is used on sugarcane when it is planted.

Mercury-containing fungicides were banned in most countries in the 1970s and 1980s. Alternative fungicides that are as effective, or more effective, than Shirtan are commercially available.

What does it mean for Sugarcane growers?

By ratifying the Minamata Convention, Australia will be required to take measures to control the use of Shirtan. Options being considered include banning the availability of Shirtan, by 2020 (if not sooner), or phasing out use over a longer period. By doing this, sugarcane growers will be required to move to alternative fungicides.

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