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People Living in Low Income Communities Likely to Face Greater Pollution Releases

New study examines links between pollution and poverty in Great Lakes basin and Toronto

Toronto, ON – People living in poverty in the Great Lakes basin may be experiencing an increased burden of high air pollution from industrial facilities in their communities, says a new study released today by the Canadian Environmental Law Association and Environmental Defence through the groups' PollutionWatch project.

The study, *An Examination of Pollution and Poverty in the Great Lakes Basin*, found 37 communities, known as census subdivisions, in the Great Lakes basin have high poverty rates at or above the national average (11.8%) and high releases of toxic air pollutants (over 100,000 kg) from industrial facilities. In Ontario, these communities include: Sault St. Marie, Espanola, Windsor, London, Hamilton and Toronto. In Québec, these communities include: Montréal, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Trois Rivières, Drummondville and Rouyn-Noranda. For a full list of communities, download the Great Lakes Summary Fact Sheet from the PollutionWatch web site (www.PollutionWatch.org).

“This is one of the first studies in Canada to investigate the relationship between pollution and poverty in the Great Lakes basin. It shows that large amounts of pollution are still released in the Great Lakes basin, that some areas have higher pollution releases than others, and that some areas have a double challenge of high pollution releases and high poverty rates,” said Fe de Leon, researcher at the Canadian Environmental Law Association. “Future research and policy decisions to reduce pollution and poverty in the Great Lakes basin should take account of the findings of this study.”

The PollutionWatch study mapped air release data of toxic pollutants and criteria air contaminants from the federal government's National Pollutant Release Inventory (2005 data), and income data from Statistics Canada (2001 Statistics Canada Census) to explore whether areas in the Great Lakes basin with high air releases also have high percentages of people living in poverty. While some communities did have high levels of both air releases (i.e. air toxic pollutants and criteria air contaminants) and poverty, the study found that some areas with very high releases had low poverty, and some areas with very high poverty had low releases.

The study also examined the relationship between pollution and poverty at the neighbourhood level in the City of Toronto, providing detailed information of how the two may be related on a much smaller geographic scale. Similar to the Great Lakes basin as a whole, the releases of air pollutants from industrial facilities and poverty rates vary across Toronto, with some neighbourhoods facing a double challenge of high poverty rates and high air releases. In total, 17 neighbourhoods in Toronto had a poverty rate at or higher than the national average, and high releases (over 100,000 kg) of combined toxic air pollutants and criteria air contaminants.

Environmental Defence [t] 416 323-9521 [f] 416 323-9301 [e] info@environmentaldefence.ca

Canadian Environmental Law Association [t] 416 960-2284 [f] 416 960-9392 [e] pollutionwatch@ccla.ca

“Pollution and poverty collide in some communities, potentially adding to the health burden that many people living in poverty already face,” said Jennifer Foulds, Communications Director, Environmental Defence. “Clearly, the message to governments is they need to work hard to significantly reduce pollution and poverty, as the two often go hand-in-hand.”

The Canadian Environmental Law Association and Environmental Defence recommend:

- further action to reduce and eliminate pollution in the Great Lakes basin through an increased focus on pollution prevention at all levels of society, through toxics use reduction strategies and Toronto’s Environmental Reporting, Disclosure and Innovation Program;
- formal recognition by all levels of government that pollution can affect people’s mental, physical and emotional health and that people living in poverty may be additionally affected by pollution;
- further research be conducted by all levels of government, academics, anti-poverty and environmental organizations to gain a better understanding as to how people’s mental, physical and emotional health is affected by living in poverty in communities with high pollution burdens. These findings should help inform the development of anti-poverty reduction plans; and,
- governments develop, in consultation with a diverse range of communities, including anti-poverty, environmental and health sectors, a clear environmental equity policy framework that considers how the connections between poverty and pollution can be integrated in concrete ways into environmental decision-making processes (e.g., environmental approvals, standards approvals, management of toxic substances, etc.) The process of facility siting and permit renewals should include the consideration of cumulative loadings from multiple sources in the air shed.

An Examination of Pollution and Poverty in the Great Lakes Basin, as well as separate Fact Sheets for the results from the whole Great Lakes basin and for Toronto, are available to download for free on the PollutionWatch web site at www.PollutionWatch.org.

PollutionWatch (www.PollutionWatch.org) is a collaborative project of Environmental Defence and the Canadian Environmental Law Association.

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For more information, or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Fe de Leon, Canadian Environmental Law Association, (416) 960-2284 ext. 223; (416) 624-6758 (cell)
Jennifer Foulds, Environmental Defence, (416) 323-9521 ext. 232; (647) 280-9521 (cell)