

# Mercury Concerns Heat Up

Mercury in the environment has been a major item on the environmental front for the past 30-plus years. During that period, there has been substantial research concerning mercury's health effect and how it moves into and through the food chain. Over the last several years, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration have issued fish advisories concerning, among other things, mercury levels in recreationally-caught fish. At the present time 41 states have issued fish advisories warning the public about the high mercury levels in fish caught in certain bodies of water.

During 2001, the issue of seafood with high levels of methylmercury was raised in a series of articles appearing in the Mobile Register. The paper informed readers about the health risks of high mercury levels, especially in pregnant women and children. The paper also explored the issues of where mercury comes from, what kinds of fish are most affected, and what state and federal agencies are doing to protect the public concerning these contaminated fish. The Register also demonstrated through human hair and fish sampling that this was a Gulf-wide issue that affected many coastal residents and the commercial fishing industries located along the Gulf Coast.

Several area organizations came forward and took the first major step to address this issue by organizing *The Mercury Forum: Assessing Methylmercury in the Northern Gulf Environment*. Held May 20-21, 2002 in Mobile, this science-based program served as a forum for scientists, educators, consumer groups, environmentalists, industry, and policy makers to learn more about methylmercury in the environment. The meeting served as a first step toward developing a comprehensive plan for addressing the issue that involves all stakeholder groups. The Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium (MASGC), Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, The Forum: Industrial Partners in Environmental Progress, and the Mobile Bay Watch sponsored The Mercury Forum.

More than 280 people from 17 states participated in the meeting, including U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama. His personal communication with President Bush just prior to the Forum has resulted in the establishment of a special task force to look into the Gulf Mercury issue. Senator Sessions' commitment set the tone for the meeting, and the other speakers and attendees echoed this commitment and concern in the discussions that followed each session of the meeting. The culmination of hundreds of ideas and opinions resulted in a list of 17 proactive recommendations (see chart) that everyone prioritized at the end of the meeting. Action will be taken on these recommendations by various agencies and groups in the Gulf region. MASGC's mercury internet site, [www.masgc.org/mercury](http://www.masgc.org/mercury), contains most of the PowerPoint presentations from the meeting, as well as speaker abstracts and biographies, and additional internet links to mercury resources. The website will continue to provide updates on the Forum's recommendations, and on new research and reports dealing with mercury in the Gulf.

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## Prioritized Recommendations

### Highest ranking recommendation, selected by over 60% of participants:

- ▶ Expand Gulf-wide environmental monitoring programs (inland and coastal) – Fish, sediments, plants, aquatic organisms, water, and air.

### Recommendations chosen by 20 to 30% of the participants:

- ▶ Provide adequate funding for involved entities
- ▶ Support health exposure study (include consumption)
- ▶ Investigate Hg pathways and risk in the ecosystem
- ▶ Develop a Gulf-wide risk communication and outreach program
- ▶ Develop mercury reduction plan

### Recommendations chosen by 10 to 20% of the participants:

- ▶ Develop standard sampling methodologies
- ▶ Develop consistent mercury advisories
- ▶ Develop a comprehensive data management system
- ▶ Promote unbiased research

### Recommendations chosen by less than 10% of the participants: Provide free/subsidized hair testing for exposure

- ▶ Investigate remediation options
- ▶ Analyze comprehensive cost benefit and health risks
- ▶ Work toward comprehensive stakeholder collaboration in agency programs
- ▶ Take comprehensive inventory of current and historic mercury sources
- ▶ Health impact study