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MERCURY CONTAMINATION OF MANITOBA FISH

Statement by Hon. Sidney Green, Q.C.,
Minister of Mines and Natural Resources,
in the Manitoba Legislature April 8, 1970

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify the Government's position with regard to mercury contamination of Manitoba fish.

The possibility that some of our rivers and lakes were being polluted with mercury was revealed late last year. Since then federal and provincial authorities have been carrying out an intensive research program to determine the source, extent and potential effects of this pollution. While this research was being carried out the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation continued to buy all fish caught by Manitoba fishermen. The Corporation is a federal agency and is, for all practical purposes, the sole buyer of fish in Manitoba. All fish received by the Corporation were checked and those which were contaminated were withheld from the market and destroyed. The Corporation was able to buy and dispose of the contaminated fish because the federal Department of Fisheries and Forestry agreed to reimburse it for any losses sustained while the problem was being clarified. Unfortunately, the federal Department unilaterally terminated this arrangement on March 31st. Since then, the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation has refused to buy mercury contaminated fish.

On Monday, April 6th, the Federal-Provincial Prairie Fisheries Committee met here in Winnipeg. This Committee is composed of the deputy ministers and other senior civil servants who have been concerned with the mercury problem. I am informed that the committee reviewed the results of research to date and made certain recommendations. The following facts have been established:

1. Federal health authorities will not permit the sale of fish which contain more than .5 parts per million of mercury.
2. Specimens of pike, pickerel, sauger, bass, perch, sheepshead (sunfish) and gold-eye taken in the Saskatchewan River, Cedar Lake and Lake Winnipeg have been found to contain more than .5 parts per million of mercury.
3. Whitefish and tullibee are not contaminated.
4. None of the fish species in Moose Lake, Lake Winnipegosis or Lake Manitoba are contaminated.
5. A Saskatoon chemical plant which is alleged to be the source of mercury pollut-

ion in the Saskatchewan River System has ceased to discharge mercury into the river. Federal authorities have located a chemical plant in Ontario which is alleged to be the source of mercury pollution in the Winnipeg River system and this plant has taken and is taking action to eliminate the discharge of mercury into the river system. It appears that the Red River system is also being polluted, and federal authorities are now working with United States officials to locate and shut off the source of mercury.

6. Once the pollution of the Province's waters is stopped, the degree of concentration of mercury in our fish populations should gradually be reduced. The flushing action of the spring run-off should help matters, but at this time we are unable to say exactly how long it will take to de-contaminate our fish.
7. The Department of Health and Social Services stated earlier this year that the casual or accidental consumption of moderate amounts of contaminated fish is not a health hazard. Health authorities have now elaborated on this statement, as follows:

A person may eat one meal of fish, with levels of mercury content found in Manitoba lakes, per week without running any risk of illness. However, eating more than one meal per week may constitute a health hazard, and dependence on such fish as the main source of protein is potentially dangerous. People should not consume more than one meal of such fish per week.

The Department of Mines and Natural Resources is now considering the implications of these facts for the commercial and sport fisheries in the waters affected. The Federal-Provincial Prairie Fisheries Committee made certain recommendations and I am writing to the Minister of Fisheries and Forestry to determine what decisions will be made by the Federal Government, as a result of these recommendations. Following the receipt of a response from the Federal Minister, the Manitoba Government will make a decision relative to these matters.