

September 16, 2019

Dear Minister Elvestuen:

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the “thought starter” on the theme for UNEA5. The [Global Alliance on Health and Pollution](#), has over 65 member organizations representing environment and health ministries, multi- and bilateral funders, research institutions and NGOs. Soon to formalize as an NGO based in Geneva, [Pure Earth](#) serves as the current Secretariat. GAHP’s objectives are to:

- Assist government agencies in low and middle-income countries to prioritize and address pollution, through health and pollution action planning (HPAP) and other development planning processes, in coordination with national and international stakeholders;
- Build public, political, technical and financial support to address pollution globally by promoting scientific research on pollution and raising awareness on the scope and impacts of all types of pollution; and
- Assist GAHP members to coordinate country activities on pollution, and track global progress of solutions to pollution and health problems.

GAHP would like to express support for Tentative thematic area 3: Addressing the water–energy–food interlinkages for sustainability. As stated in the “Thought-starter”,

**Tentative thematic area 3: Addressing the water–energy–food interlinkages for sustainability**

*Human needs for water, energy and food all rely on natural resources that are under stress from biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, climate change and pollution. It is increasingly recognized that we need to apply an integrated systems approach to find the solutions to these pressures. The interlinked nature of the various environmental challenges and economic activities motivates us to develop more effective, integrated approaches and solutions, addressing them together. ... The world faces interlinked environmental crises of biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, climate change and pollution. A systems approach would allow us to tackle these crises in an integrated and timely manner that is successful and impactful.*

GAHP strongly agrees with the integrated systems approach to understanding problems and crafting solutions. One of GAHP’s upcoming focal points is the problem

of industrial chemical wastewater being used in agriculture contaminating soil with heavy metals.

With water tables dropping, and pressure from climate change impacting agriculture, many farming regions are using untreated industrial wastewater to water their crops. Heavy metals and chemicals impair crop yields, but more concerning, toxins are taken up by grains and food crops. Once shipped to market, they enter the global food chain and are a growing source of toxic exposure to all peoples of the world. For example, arsenic has been found in baby food, lead in spices and grains, pesticides in fruit and vegetables at significant levels in European and US supermarkets.

GAHP and Pure Earth highlighted this problem in a recent report, "[Pollution Know No Borders](#)".

*Across India, and specifically around large metropolitan regions, many farmers raise their crops with untreated industrial and urban wastewater. Only 30 percent of India's wastewater undergoes any sort of treatment before being discharged as industrial effluent that contains multiple heavy metals and toxic chemicals.*

*"The water is so polluted, we can only grow resistant crops," says one farmer. "Half of our chili plants have diseases, and at times the industries discharge acid, which damages the crops. If we use river water or not—we always lose."*

*Food safety is a major concern for the Chinese public. One study collected 465 published papers on heavy metal pollution rates in farmland soil throughout China. The results showed that cadmium was the most common pollutant, clocking in at 7.75%, followed by mercury, copper, nickel and zinc. The total pollution rate in Chinese farmland soil was 10.18%. The human activities of mining and smelting, industry, irrigation by sewage, urban development, and fertilizer application released certain amounts of heavy metals into soil, which resulted in the farmland soil being polluted.*

The World Bank just published "[Quality Unknown: The Invisible Water Crisis](#)." This report also addresses the industrial pollution crisis and the intersection of water, soil, air pollution and the impact on our global food supply.

*As countries grow and develop, the cocktail of chemicals and vectors that they must contend with changes. Pollutants of poverty dominate poor countries with limited sanitation infrastructure and unimproved water sources and include fecal coliform, unmanaged geogenic pollutants, and general trash that clogs waterways. Pollutants of growing prosperity arise from industrial processes and intensive agriculture. Recently, the world is turning its attention to the harm caused by emerging pollutants, which include pharmaceuticals such as anti-inflammatory drugs, analgesics, antibiotics, and hormones, as well as plastics, which break down into microplastics and nanoplastics, emitting harmful chemicals and choking ecosystems.*

We agree with the World Bank's conclusion that pollution from untreated industrial wastewater needs more attention.

***Invest in what works. Pollution that cannot be prevented must be treated. Wastewater treatment has a vital role to play – it is crucial for a country's health, food security and economy by helping remove pollution and debris. Investments in wastewater treatment are a down payment on a cleaner future.***

GAHP supports a UNEA5 theme focusing on the water–energy–food interlinkages that includes a strong focus on pollution and human health.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit comments.

Sincerely,

Rachael Kupka  
Acting Executive Director  
Global Alliance on Health and Pollution

