**New study finds global efforts to reduce pollution into Arctic may be working**By Bob Weber, THE CANADIAN PRESS

Go ahead and have seconds on that muskox mac-and-cheese.

A new study has found that levels of contaminants, including lead, mercury and PCBs, are all dropping in the bodies of some aboriginal mothers, suggesting that global efforts to reduce toxins accumulating in Arctic food animals may be paying off.

"We found that the young expectant women were consuming more traditional food and their body burden of contaminants had reduced," said Barb Armstrong, who will present the study next week at a conference in Lake Louise, Alta.

"It means that they're healthier and they don't have to worry about long-range contaminants in any of their traditional diet."

The Monitoring Our Mothers study looked at contaminant levels in the blood of pregnant women from 14 communities in the northwestern Northwest Territories, comparing the results with a similar study in 2000.

Almost all the subjects were aboriginals whose diet depended heavily on foods such as caribou, fish, beluga and seal, animals that tend to accumulate environmental toxins that drift in from the south.

The study found significant drops in the amount of such contaminants found in blood and hair samples from the mothers.

Levels of lead, mercury and PCBs - considered a carcinogen - all fell by 24 per cent, from 94 to 76 micrograms per litre of blood.

The average levels of both lead and mercury are now below the threshold considered to be of concern.

Average PCB levels are now 1.3 per cent above the level of concern. In 2000, they were 4.3 per cent above that level.

The drops occurred despite the fact that some mothers surveyed were eating more of some types of traditional foods than mothers in the original survey.

A similar study is being conducted in some Nunavut communities. Those results are not yet available, although Armstrong said they are expected to be similar.

The results are good news for northern aboriginals who still depend on the land for many of their meals. They may also represent a victory for international efforts taken to limit such pollutants.

PCBs first began appearing in the breast milk of Inuit mothers in the 1980s. Scientists found that global air currents were pumping the toxins up from the south, where they accumulated in the fatty tissues of the arctic animals that make up traditional diets.

At one point, researchers found Inuit people with PCB levels up to 10 times those of southerners - some of the highest levels in the world - despite the fact they lived far from any industrial sources of pollution.

Canada began raising concerns over the issue as far back in 1989 and conducted much of the early research that eventually persuaded the world to act. In 2001, Canada became the first country to sign and ratify the Stockholm Convention on limiting the use of the so-called "dirty dozen" organochlorine chemicals poisoning the Arctic.

The treaty became binding on its signatories in 2004, after it was signed by France.

"In an era where climate change is freaking us all out, maybe it's time we gave ourselves a pat on back and moved forward and don't give up," said Armstrong.

For Armstrong, whose work revolves in large part around convincing northern aboriginals that traditional foods are healthy, the results are particularly satisfying.

"I was so relieved," she said. "When you're out there telling people to eat the food, it was really gratifying to do some hands-on research that had a positive outcome."

Nutritionists have long pointed out that traditional foods are often much healthier than processed, store-bought foods, especially considering that high prices in northern grocery stores for fresh, wholesome foods limit how much of them northerners can afford.

Armstrong has recently completed a series of cooking shows showing people how to blend food from the land with modern eating habits and has published a cookbook with recipes such as ookpik-berry smoothies, muskox mac-and-cheese and whitefish lasagna.

Blending old and new foods has proved a popular idea.

"The first show had 35 people (in the audience)," Armstrong said. "By the time we finished, we had to have three different sittings."

*\*\*\*   NOTICE:  In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, this material is distributed, without profit, for research and educational purposes only.   \*\*\**