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NEWS RELEASE

April 16, 2007

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ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER CONFERENCE TO FOCUS ON MONTANA, JAPAN

MISSOULA –

At first glance Libby and Minamata, Japan, don't have much in common.

Libby is home to only a fraction of the population of Minamata. But it's a different kind of number that links these two communities – the number of sicknesses and deaths among citizens because of major environmental disasters.

The University of Montana will host a conference, "Environmental Disaster and Community Response: The Cases of Minamata, Japan and Libby, Montana," to discuss community responses to the tragedies, as well as efforts to connect Libby and Minamata high schools. The conference will be held Wednesday, April 18, and Thursday, April 19.

With assistance from the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership, UM's Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center has initiated an ongoing environmental relationship between Montana and its sister state of Kumamoto, Japan, through a comparison of the human and institutional responses to environmental degradation in Libby and Minamata.

Fifty years ago Chisso Corporation, a plastics and petrochemical company, dumped an estimated 27 tons of mercury compounds into Minamata Bay, poisoning the town's residents. The waste caused numerous deaths, major birth defects and the onset of many progressive neurological diseases.

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Libby became a federal Superfund site after numerous residents died or contracted respiratory damage from exposure to asbestos, a component of vermiculite, which was being mined in the area.

In January, Missoula residents Terry Weidner and Ian Marquand, along with two Libby High School teachers, traveled to Japan. Weidner is director of the Mansfield Center, and Marquand is from Missoula television station KPAX and president of Friends of Japan – a Missoula organization that fosters community between Montana and its sister state.

Weidner received a grant to send himself and one Libby teacher to Minamata, but when he and Marquand approached the Libby school district, administrators were so excited they offered to pay to send a second teacher on the trip as well.

“The two schools hope to have an idea exchange,” Weidner said. “They will try to figure out what approaches will be most useful to them. The goal is to get people to travel back and forth.”

While Libby is looking for support to try to send some of its students over to Japan, it already has takers willing to make the trip.

“Libby High School has applied for grants to help fund students and a teacher to go over to Minamata,” said Jeff Gruber, a teacher at Libby High School.

“I definitely think that our young people can help steer this town through this crisis,” Gruber said. “If they see how Minamata views their situation and how they are addressing it as a society, then they can come back and help change the nature of the crisis in Libby.”

While the group knew the hard facts of the situation, they weren't sure where Minamata was in the clean-up process and how people in the area viewed the disaster.

“Like Libby, it’s hard for Minamata to rise above the stigma of being the poisoned place,” Weidner said. “I saw this as a real opportunity. The Japanese were interested that we were interested. I thought that was heartening.”

While in Japan, the group visited an environmental center on Minamata Bay and learned how the students were taught in the classroom today about the tragic event. They also talked to victims of diseases related to the pollution and spoke with four people who had received the disease in-vitro. Also, the group met with the mayor of Minamata and heard her speak about the lessons of her city and what it hoped to teach the world.

The city is still trying to reassure both Minamata citizens and tourists that it is indeed safe once again. Part of their approach is to have all new companies opening up business in the city sign a pledge to be stewards of the natural world.

The UM conference schedule follows:

Wednesday, April 18

- 7 p.m. – “From Environmental Tragedy to Hope: The Libby and Minamata Stories” – Premiere of a documentary created and produced by Marquand on the environmental disasters in Libby and Minamata.

Thursday, April 19

- 1 p.m. – Introductory remarks and panel discussion – “A Story of Two Communities: The Libby Experience” – Speaking about Libby’s experience with environmental degradation will be Gayla Benefield, a Libby resident of 60 years and chairperson of Lincoln County Asbestos Victim’s Relief Organization; Gene Reckin, a 28-year Libby resident, teacher at Libby High School and visitor to Minamata; and Gruber, a lifelong

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Libby resident. Craig Molgaard, chair of the UM Program in Public Health, will serve as the panel's moderator.

- 2:30 p.m. – Panel discussion – “A Story of Two Communities: The Minamata Experience” – Sharing stories about how environmental tragedy affected their communities will be Dr. Shigeo Enoki from the Kumamoto University Hospital and Mari Susa, a professor from the faculty of law at Kumamoto University. Marquand will serve as moderator for this discussion.
- 3:45 p.m. – “Looking Ahead: Science, Justice and Ecological Restoration” – On hand to discuss the future of both affected areas will be Andrij Holian, director of UM's Center for Environmental Health Sciences; Robin Saha, professor with the Environmental Studies Program; and Patrick Burke, founder and president of Bitterroot Restoration Inc. for 18 years. Dane Scott, director of the UM Center for Ethics, will join as a moderator. All events will be held in Turner Hall's Dell Brown Room.

Conference sponsors are the Japan Foundation, UM College of Health Professions and Biomedical Sciences, UM Center for Environmental Health Sciences, UM School of Public and Community Health Sciences, UM Center for Ethics, UM Environmental Studies Program, Missoula Friends of Japan, Kumamoto Prefectural Office and the Montana State Office in Kumamoto, Japan.

For more information call the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at 406-243-2988.

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