



New Mercury Rule Fails to Protect Kids, Say EPA's Own Child Health Advisors

Letter to Administrator Leavitt Urges Tougher Standards for Power Plants

WASHINGTON — As the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) prepares to formalize its proposal to establish mercury pollution limits for power plants, the EPA's respected Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee (CHPAC) sent a letter to EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt this week in an unprecedented move urging him to significantly strengthen the proposed rule to reduce the threat of mercury to children. EPA's proposed rule, expected to be published in the Federal Register on Friday, January 30, 2004, would postpone major mercury reductions from power plants until 2018 or beyond, allowing as much as 650,000 pounds of excess mercury to be released into the atmosphere. In addition, the proposed rule would remove mercury from power plants from EPA's list of hazardous (toxic) air pollutants.

The EPA's Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee (CHPAC) found that the mercury proposal "does not sufficiently protect our nation's children." The CHPAC includes doctors, nurses and other child and public health experts from academia, state agencies, industry, and the public sector, all of whom were appointed by the current administration. The letter marks the first time that the CHPAC has ever formally objected to an EPA proposed rule-making for its failure to protect children's health.

The letter adds, "While cost effectiveness is important, the priority should be to protect children's health in a timely manner."

"EPA's mercury rule ignores sound science and our children's health," said Susan West Marmagas, M.P.H., Director, Environmental & Health Programs, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and a member of the CHPAC.

"We know that mercury can damage our children's intellectual and emotional development. It is unacceptable that EPA's proposal allows power plants to pump out excess mercury for another fifteen years, contaminating our air, water, food, and our children," Marmagas noted.

Children, infants and women of child-bearing age are particularly vulnerable to mercury exposure. Mercury can harm fetal development and impair children's cognitive growth, including motor skills, learning capacity, and memory, along with other symptoms of neurological damage. Currently, about 8 percent of women of child-bearing age—literally millions of American women—have blood mercury concentrations higher than the level considered safe by the EPA. New research made public by EPA scientists this week indicates that as many as 600,000 children annually may be adversely affected.

Women and children are commonly exposed to mercury when they eat contaminated fish. Late last year the U.S. Food and Drug Administration began developing new guidelines for fish consumption indicating that children and women of child-bearing age should limit their consumption of tuna and other common

fish species as a result of unsafe mercury levels. Forty five states have so far issued 2,140 specific fish consumption advisories due to mercury contamination, a 138% increase from 1993 to 2002.

The EPA has determined that coal-fired power plants are the largest emitter of mercury in the United States, responsible for more than one-third of all industrial mercury pollution. Airborne mercury eventually deposits in water bodies and has contaminated 10.2 million acres of lakes, estuaries, and wetlands and 415,000 miles of streams, rivers, and coastline. This pollution becomes concentrated in the food chain, particularly in fish.

In addition to the proposed delay in the mercury reductions, CHPAC is also concerned about EPA's proposal to allow power plants to 'cap-and-trade' their emissions. According to CHPAC, the 'cap-and-trade' approach "may not address existing hot spots and may create new local hot spots for mercury, disproportionately impacting local communities."

Since mercury is a toxic and accumulative pollutant, the cap-and-trade model proposed by EPA is likely to impact communities with particularly high levels of toxic mercury pollution relative to other geographic areas.

Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) is a leading public policy organization with nearly 30,000 members representing the medical and public health professions and concerned citizens, working together for nuclear disarmament, a healthy environment, and an end to the epidemic of gun violence.

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