

The Facts About Pennsylvania's Proposed Mercury Rule

Pennsylvania needs a strong regulation to reduce mercury pollution from power plants to protect public health and reduce mercury levels in fish and wildlife. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has proposed a regulation requiring coal-fired power plants to reduce their mercury pollution by 80 percent by 2010 and 90 percent by 2015.

Unfortunately, legislation has been introduced in both the House (HB 2610) and Senate (SB 1201) to prohibit DEP from adopting a Pennsylvania mercury rule and forcing the state to fall back on the weak federal mercury rule.

Here are some of the facts about mercury pollution and the Department of Environmental Protection's proposed mercury rule.

- Pennsylvania power plants are the nation's second biggest mercury polluters and put more than 6,000 pounds of mercury into the air each year.
- A study by the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) verified that **more than 600,000 women of childbearing age have mercury in their blood above the level set as safe by the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Academy of Sciences.** While the study did not find women with blood levels at which twice as many of their children would end up scoring in the bottom five percent of cognitive tests, mercury can affect development at much lower levels. Other studies have found populations in the United States who eat lots of fish with blood levels at and above the level proven to cause neurological damage in children. The presence of mercury-contaminated fish in Pennsylvania exposes women who eat them and their children to harm.
- Proponents of legislation to block Pennsylvania from adopting a strong regulation claim that the federal Clean Air Mercury Rule (CAMR) will reduce emissions at Pennsylvania power plants by 86 percent. **However, there is no guarantee that mercury emissions from Pennsylvania power plants will be significantly reduced** under CAMR because the federal rule allows power plants to buy mercury allowances instead of installing pollution control technology to actually clean up.

Pennsylvania power plants are currently the largest purchasers of pollution allowances in the country. Also the EPA has acknowledged that the mercury reductions expected to be achieved by CAMR will not happen until 2025. The Congressional Research Service says that because of the trading and banking of allowances, CAMR's mercury reduction goals will not be achieved until 2030.

- **Trading of mercury allowances lead to toxic "hotspots." The latest studies confirm hotspots around power plants.** An EPA study of mercury deposition around Steubenville, Ohio found that about 70 percent of the mercury deposition came from local and regional sources. The study used the latest sampling techniques that corrected for previous studies that relied on too few sampling stations to catch mercury deposition. In fact, the researchers in a briefing to a top EPA official called the Steubenville study findings, "scientifically and politically significant." The study withstood a year-long peer review which validated its results.

The best way to identify a mercury hotspot is to look for mercury contamination in fish. The fish with the highest level of mercury contamination in Pennsylvania are found in **Lake Wallenpaupack** in Pike County. Other bodies of water where fish are highly contaminated with mercury include the **Susquehanna River** in Bradford, Susquehanna, Luzerne, Wyoming and Lancaster counties, **Lake Erie**, the **Schuylkill River** in Berks, Chester and Montgomery counties, the **Allegheny River** in Warren, Forest, McKean and Venango counties, and the **Delaware River** in Monroe, Wayne and Bucks counties. There are 207 places identified where fish were found to have levels of mercury too high to eat more than two meals a month.

- **Reductions of mercury emissions at Pennsylvania power plants will reduce mercury contamination in Pennsylvania lakes, rivers and streams.** Waste incinerators were required to reduce their emissions of mercury by 90 percent in Florida. Subsequently mercury contamination in fish and other wildlife in the Everglades went down by 75 percent. A more recent study has shown that mercury reductions at waste incinerators in Massachusetts led to a 30 percent reduction in mercury levels in fish in only seven years.
- **Mercury pollution can be reduced at reasonable, affordable cost. Pennsylvania power plants are very profitable.** Like a fully paid home mortgage, their capital costs have been paid off. Pennsylvania coal-fired power plants are baseload plants that run all of the time. They produce electricity at costs far below the wholesale price of electricity which more and more frequently is set by the cost of electricity produced by gas-fired plants. Wholesale electricity prices range between six and seven cents per kilowatt hour (kwh); coal-fired power plants produce electricity at a cost of between three and four cents per kwh.

A National Wildlife Federation report estimated that the average customer would see an increase of **\$1.08 on monthly electric bills if all the cost were passed through to consumers.** In Pennsylvania's competitive retail electricity market, electricity suppliers cannot just routinely pass on their costs. They can choose to pass on none, some or all of their costs, or they can decide to reduce profits.