



MERCURY MYTHS

What opponents of the strong state rule say:

Mercury isn't a problem for Pennsylvanians. Because mercury emissions from U.S.-based power plants account for approximately 1 percent of all emissions worldwide, and because Pennsylvania power plants account for 0.09 percent of global emissions, there is no reason to act locally.

THE TRUTH:

This is a classic, directly out of the book, "How to Lie with Statistics." (And we can't even verify that their statistics are true.)

Mercury most certainly is a problem for Pennsylvanians. Pennsylvania ranks second in the nation for mercury pollution to the air, and the result is seen in our streams and fish. Over 80 bodies of water in the Commonwealth currently contain fish too contaminated with mercury to eat without restrictions, based on the actual mercury content measured in the fish caught in these water bodies. When we can't eat locally caught fish, it's not only a public health problem but also risks our vibrant sports tourism industry.

What opponents of the strong state rule say:

A state-specific rule would do little to benefit Pennsylvania because mercury is a globally emitted pollutant, with approximately half of all emissions coming from natural sources, such as volcanoes and geysers.

THE TRUTH:

A great deal of mercury falls locally, creating hotspots with heavy mercury contamination downstream from mercury polluters. An ongoing Penn State University study, with eight years of data so far, shows that mercury levels are higher near local power plants. A site in Cresson, Cambria County, located near and downwind from several coal-fired power plants, had an average 47 percent higher wet deposition rate of mercury than a site in Wellsboro, Tioga County.

These Pennsylvania results follow a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study of mercury deposition around Steubenville, Ohio, showing that about 70 percent of the mercury deposition came from local and regional sources.

And cleaning up local polluters means significant reductions in local mercury levels. In Massachusetts, the state enacted the nation's toughest mercury emission laws for incinerators; seven years later, they measured a 32-percent average decrease in the level of mercury found in a signature freshwater fish caught in nine lakes in the northeastern corner of the state. A Florida Everglades study showed that mercury concentrations found in fish and wading birds there dropped by 60 percent to 70 percent due to local mercury emission reduction efforts.

What opponents of the strong state rule say:

Americans are not exposed to mercury levels that are harmful. Residents aren't being rushed to the hospital suffering from mercury poisoning because of power plant emissions

THE TRUTH:

This twisting of facts about the effects of mercury on babies' brains must not go unchallenged. Mercury is a powerful neurotoxin that can interfere with the proper development of babies' brains. A study by the Centers for

Disease Control found that about six percent of women have mercury levels in their blood above what the National Academy of Sciences, the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency say is safe. That means that an estimated 600,000 babies are born each year that have been exposed to unsafe levels of mercury in the womb.

Mercury gets into a mother's blood through food. Once it is in her blood, it easily crosses the placenta and concentrates at even higher levels in the blood of the developing baby. Mercury acts like a bio-chemical Trojan Horse since the developing fetus recognizes it as a protein instead of the toxin that it is. The growing baby attempts to incorporate it into its development, especially in building brain tissue that needs protein. Exposure to unsafe levels of mercury can lead to learning disorders, attention deficit disorders, problems with coordination and even mental retardation.

Power plants are the last unregulated source of mercury pollution. The technology exists to control this toxic pollution at reasonable cost. It's time to stop power plant mercury pollution from compromising our children's future.

What opponents of the strong state rule say:

We all agree that we need to reduce mercury emissions. That's why we're supporting the federal regulations to guarantee that all power plants clean up equally.

THE TRUTH:

Nice try, but this is more hogwash. Some of the opponents to the strong state rule are also on record opposing the federal regulations. It's hard to understand them as they talk out of both sides of their mouths.

In reality, the federal scheme almost guarantees that Pennsylvania power plants will **NOT** reduce their mercury pollution significantly because many of the plants will buy mercury allowances under the illegal federal trading scheme, instead of installing available, affordable pollution control technology.

Pennsylvania power plants have a history of relying on buying pollution allowances rather than actually ending their pollution. Our power companies lead the nation in the purchase of pollution credits -- effectively sending Pennsylvania electricity customers' cash out of state to upgrade plants elsewhere. This is especially dangerous for a toxic substance like mercury, as communities near the power plants will continue to be exposed to unacceptably high levels of mercury contamination. The "opportunity to participate in a national emissions trading program for mercury..." is actually an opportunity to continue to be slowly poisoned at our own expense.

Finally, if the federal rule is -- as expected -- declared illegal, and the legislature succeeds in banning a strong state regulation, Pennsylvania's mothers and babies will be left with absolutely no protection.

What opponents of the strong state rule say:

Forcing the power plants to clean up will cause huge increases in the cost of electricity to all Pennsylvanians.

THE TRUTH:

Mercury pollution controls are available and very affordable, as a Department of Energy official acknowledged on the public television show "Pennsylvania Inside Out" on WPSU. On the show, Tom Feely III of the National Energy Technology Laboratory said, "There is existing technology that has already proven to be able to take mercury out... That technology is relatively inexpensive on a capital cost basis compared to a scrubber... We don't anticipate -- just looking at some back of the envelope calculations that we've done -- that there would be a significant increase in electric utility rates."

And any cost will not necessarily be passed on to customers. Because all Pennsylvania electricity suppliers must compete on the open market under electricity restructuring, each company must assume the cost of doing business. Mercury regulation may slightly reduce the already large profits of the companies.