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Mercury danger

An EPA proposal to relax mercury pollution rules poses a serious environmental and health hazard, especially in North Carolina

There is no doubt who has the most to gain and who has the most to lose from an Environmental Protection Agency proposal to weaken the rules against mercury pollution. The energy industry, pointing to the costs of power production, has had its way at the EPA. As a result, the agency is considering a plan that would increase the danger from mercury emissions for all Americans. In North Carolina, the top airborne mercury polluters are the 14 coal-fired power plants owned by Progress Energy and Duke Energy. Because of mercury in the environment, North Carolina women of child-bearing age and children have been warned not to eat several species of fish caught in waters south and east of I-85.

The dangers of mercury poisoning are well-documented. The federal Centers for Disease Control estimates that one in 12 women in the United States carries mercury levels that are unsafe for a developing fetus. High levels of mercury can impair children's physical and mental development, including motor skills, learning capacity and memory.

Yet in the face of such disturbing reports, the EPA under the Bush administration has bought the energy industry's cost-conscious position on mercury pollution. The Clinton administration EPA took a more reasonable approach, approving rules that would have reduced mercury pollution by 90 percent by 2008. According to the EPA's own research, the technology exists to reach that goal. Now the Bush administration, at the the energy industry's urging, wants to change that to a 70 percent reduction by 2018.

What is just as worrisome is the proposal that mercury polluters be allowed to buy and sell pollution allowances among themselves rather than adhering to the national, across the board, reduction required now. Such an option, called "cap and trade," would allow electric utilities in North Carolina, for instance, to avoid any additional

reduction in mercury emissions by buying credits from other areas.

At the heart of the EPA proposal is the wrong-headed attitude that mercury pollution can be treated as if it were just another form of smog, irritating and harmful but not seriously dangerous. Yet mercury's toxicity is well-known. And according to research compiled by the League of Women Voters of Wake County and presented at hearings held here this week, some of the highest levels of mercury ever recorded in humans have been found in residents of Columbus and Brunswick counties. Mercury emissions from electric utilities in North Carolina are the tenth highest in the United States. Utilities are believed to contribute 40 percent of the mercury pollution emitted in the country.

North Carolina environmentalists and government officials testified that allowing industries to trade pollution allowances would create so-called "hot spots" of dangerous levels of mercury in the air, soil and water. They urged that each plant be individually held to the stricter Clinton administration rules.

Raleigh physician Dr. John Pittman, who specializes in treating metal poisoning, testified that mercury is also linked to heart disease, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. For that reason, he said, not taking the strongest possible steps to reduce mercury pollution is "ludicrous and incomprehensible."

With an ear toward such credible warnings, the EPA should return to its important charge: protecting the health of the American people from those whose chief concern is profit. Given clear evidence of the dangers, weakening mercury pollution rules is the wrong way to do that.