

# The Washington Post

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2003

## Report Cites 10 States' Mercury Pollution

*Environmental Advocacy Group Uses EPA Data to Pinpoint 'Hot Spots'*

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Ten states, including Maryland, have pockets of airborne mercury pollution that pose serious public health risks, especially to pregnant women and their fetuses, according to a new study by an environmental advocacy group.

The report by Environmental Defense, based on six-month-old computer modeling data from the Environmental Protection Agency, showed that the vast majority of mercury pollution in these "hot spots" came from nearby coal-fired power plants and other facilities. The finding runs counter to assertions by the utility industry that mercury pollution is globally ubiquitous -- literally carried around the world by the wind -- and cannot be adequately regulated by federal standards.

The Electric Power Research Institute, an industry group, estimates that on average 70 percent of mercury deposits come from global sources. But in nine of the 10 states with the worst mercury concentrations, power plants or other facilities within those states contributed 50 to 80 percent of the mercury, according to the Environmental Defense study. The EPA did not dispute the report's findings but said it is pursuing its own methods to reduce mercury emissions.

The annual mercury concentrations ranged from a low of 65 grams of mercury per square kilometer in Pennsylvania and Tennessee to 125 to 127 grams per square kilometer in Indiana and Michigan. Maryland registered 95 grams per square kilometer. Other states with mercury problems are Florida, Illinois, South Carolina, North Carolina and Texas, the report said. By comparison, relatively safe states with few local sources of mercury pollution registered

mercury deposits of 10 to 15 grams per square kilometer.

While mercury pollution from medical and municipal waste incinerators has all but disappeared since federal and state authorities imposed tough regulations in the early 1990s, coal-fired power plants remain unregulated and account for about 40 percent of U.S. mercury emissions, the largest single source. Power plants generate about 48 tons of mercury pollution a year, roughly the same as a decade ago.

"Reducing power plant pollution is critical to reducing local mercury deposition and avoiding the dangerous contamination of fish, wildlife and people," the Environmental Defense report concluded. "EPA should issue strong mercury standards for power plants that reduce mercury pollution from 48 tons today to about 5 tons, or a 90 percent reduction."

Jim Owen, a spokesman for the Edison Electric Institute, a utility industry advocacy group, said, "We disagree with the study's conclusion that the public is at great risk from mercury from coal-fired power plants." He said other studies "suggest that hot spots are not a major health concern," adding that other factors may be at play in causing health problems. "The basic message is: It all depends on how you factor your assumptions."

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that, like lead, threatens the brains and nervous systems of fetuses and young children. Exposure from eating contaminated fish can lead to a number of neurological problems, including learning and attention disabilities and mental retardation. Forty-three states have issued advisories to limit consumption of mercury-laden fish.

The new report may fuel a controversy over the Bush administration's plan for regulating mercury emissions. Until recently, the EPA appeared on track to

require individual power plants to reduce mercury emissions and other toxic pollutants by as much as 90 percent within three to four years by using the "maximum achievable control technology."

But the White House and new EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt revealed last week that they favor an alternative approach. It would place mercury under a less stringent category of the Clean Air Act, where it could be regulated along with sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide and other pollutants under a "cap and trade" program.

That approach would set an overall industry target of reducing emissions by 70 percent by 2018. Power plants with serious pollution problems could buy "credits" from cleaner-operating companies in order to help meet the industry-wide goal. A similar approach was used in a successful program begun in 1990 to combat acid rain under the Clean Air Act.

Administration officials say the new approach would achieve greater pollution reductions than was likely to occur under the previous plan, which they considered complicated and certain to draw industry resistance.

"The EPA is mandating, for the first time, a 70 percent cut in mercury emissions from power plants," EPA spokeswoman Cynthia Bergman said yesterday. "We will go from zero regulation to a mandatory 70 percent cut. This will force steep emission cuts and reduce the likelihood of hot spots from occurring. Should hot spots occur, states would have flexibility to take additional measures."

Critics say the move's net effect is to require substantially smaller reductions in mercury emissions than otherwise could be achieved and add nearly a decade to the time it would take the industry to implement mercury-reduction technology.