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Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates
Clean Water Action
International Indian Treaty Council
Ma'at Youth Academy
San Francisco Bay Area
Physicians for Social Responsibility



Contact:
Julie Silas, SF PSR (510) 594-8270
Lena Brook, CWA
(415) 369-9160 x302
Sharon Fuller, MYA
(510) 222-6594
Lakota Harden, IITC
(415) 641-4482
Karen Pierce, BHPCA
(415) 641-2996

EPA's Mercury Rule Will Hurt Kids, Say Local Health Experts

Local Doctors and Community Advocates Warn of Threat to Children's Health from Polluter-Friendly New Standards

(Berkeley, California) — A diverse coalition of local experts and organizations are formally kicking off a local campaign today to oppose a new rule, from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), that they say will put children at risk. The groups are urging the public to demand that the EPA go back to the drawing board to ensure that the toxic mercury pollution that threatens the nation's children is reduced as much as possible, as quickly as possible.

Members of the coalition are releasing a consensus statement in Washington D.C. today, signed by many organizations throughout the country, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Public Health Association, and the American Nurses Association. Locally, Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates, Clean Water Action, International Indian Treaty Council, Ma'at Youth Academy, and San Francisco Bay Area Physicians for Social Responsibility are warning communities about the threat EPA's proposed new mercury rule poses to the health of children in Northern California.

“The EPA, hand in hand with corporate polluters, is proposing to give major coal-fired power plants a ‘get out of jail free’ card, by permitting them to buy and sell their rights to discharge mercury into the air,” said Gina Solomon, M.D., Senior Scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council and a member of San Francisco Bay Area Physicians for Social Responsibility. “The decision that the Bush Administration is poised to make is just another in a series of policy moves that benefit corporations at the expense of public health now and into the future.”

In December 2003, new EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt announced a plan to weaken the Clean Air Act by delaying the reduction of mercury pollution from power plants – the number one source of industrial mercury pollution and the only major source still unregulated by EPA – by 15 years or longer. Under the new EPA proposal, serious mercury reductions are delayed until 2018 or later, leaving the health of millions of growing children at risk. EPA is accepting public comments until mid-April about its proposal.

“While environmentally related illnesses are increasing, the harmful physical and mental effects of these illnesses are often overlooked in discussions on education and social inequality,” said Sharon Fuller of the Ma'at Youth Academy. “A correlation between developmental problems and where a child lives, learns, and plays does exist. More mercury emissions will only put our children at greater risk and that simply cannot be allowed.”

“Toxic mercury pollution threatens our children’s ability to think and learn – that may be a price EPA is willing to pay to appease some energy companies, but Northern California communities won’t stand for it,” said Lena Brook of Clean Water Action. “We demand a real solution to mercury pollution now.”

Children, infants and women of childbearing age are particularly vulnerable to mercury exposure. Mercury can harm fetal development and impair children’s cognitive growth, affecting motor skills, learning capacity, and memory, along with other symptoms of neurological damage. Last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly eight percent of women of childbearing age - millions of American women - have blood mercury concentrations higher than the level considered safe by the EPA. A new analysis made public by EPA scientists indicates that as many as 630,000 children annually may be overexposed by the time they are born - many of them in California.

“There is abundant evidence that mercury can slow the mental and physical development of children. According to EPA, itself, we have the technology today to eliminate 90% of mercury pollution from power plant emissions,” said Dr. Solomon. “The EPA’s proposal to slow that process down is unconscionable. No one should have to choose between eating fish and protecting the health of their children. If we want to make fish fit for everybody to eat, no matter where they live, we need to keep toxic mercury out of the environment.”

"For the EPA to allow greater mercury emissions that will expose hundreds of thousands of children to further mercury during their critical developing years is unnecessary. This has been happening for generations now" said Lakota Harden of the International Indian Treaty Council. "I'm sure that parents throughout Northern California will join me in telling the EPA that we expect the air, water and food everywhere - and our children and other living beings using these waters-to be free from mercury contamination."

Mercury contamination is of particular concern in Northern California. California has fish advisories warning of mercury pollution for lakes, rivers, streams, and the entire San Francisco Bay and Delta. Moreover, California has experienced its own mercury “hotspots,” not just from past coal-fired power plants, but as a legacy of the Gold Rush. Mercury was used to extract gold from its ore and our waterways and the fish living in them continue to suffer from the long-term pollution resulting from failure to cap inactive mines. At greatest risk are children and communities that rely heavily on fish for their diets – subsistence fishers and low-income families who depend on inexpensive sources of protein.

Although California does not run coal-fired power plants in the state, some of the electricity Californians rely on comes from coal-fired power plants in other states, creating hazards for surrounding communities. The EPA’s proposed regulations for mercury emissions allows this kind of risk-exporting to continue, by failing to require every power plant, in every community, to meet emissions standards.

“Many of the kids in Northern California born today are going to be in high-school or college before the EPA gets serious about reducing mercury pollution from power plants,” said Karen Pierce of Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates. “We cannot allow fifteen more years of mercury pollution to steal our children’s future.”

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