



Air Toxics Safeguard: Reducing Hazardous Air Pollution from Power Plants

In March 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is expected to propose an updated air quality standard for life-threatening hazardous air pollution from power plants, such as mercury and arsenic. This air toxics safeguard, called the “Mercury, Arsenic, and Dioxin Reduction Rule,” is also known as the “Power Plant MACT (Maximum Achievable Control Technology) Standard.”

This move by EPA to protect public health will save lives, prevent disease and avoid hospitalizations, while creating new jobs installing air pollution control equipment.

What Are Air Toxics?

According to EPA, air toxics are the most hazardous air pollutants. In addition to mercury and arsenic, power plants emit lead, dioxin, and acid gases that are known threats to public health. Even in small amounts these extremely harmful air pollutants are linked cancer, mutations, neurological damage and other serious health problems. Millions of tons of air toxics are released into the air annually from manmade sources such as coal-fired power plants, cement and brick manufacturing facilities, and other industrial processes.

The Health Effects of Air Toxics

Air toxics can cause both minor and serious health problems, including:

- pre-mature death
- asthma and other respiratory diseases
- cancer
- birth defects
- reproductive problems such as reduced fertility
- cardiovascular effects
- damage to the immune system
- eye irritation

Mercury is one example of a particularly harmful air toxic. Mercury builds up in the environment, and human exposure is most commonly through consumption of contaminated fish. A potent neurotoxin especially dangerous to children and fetuses, mercury exposure affects the ability to walk, talk, read, write and learn. The mercury contamination problem in the U.S. is so widespread that one in six women has mercury levels in her blood high enough to put her baby at risk, according to the EPA. One-gram of mercury deposited from the atmosphere per year, over time, is enough to contaminate a 20-acre lake, such that fish that are unsafe to consume on a regular basis. Yet 48 tons are being pumped into our air each year from coal fired power plants alone, which are the largest domestic source of unregulated mercury emissions in the United States.

The Cost of the Status Quo

Our communities are paying for the costs of toxic air pollution with these sometimes deadly health problems, as well as unfishable rivers, lakes and streams. Study after study shows that to

protect public health, polluters must significantly reduce the amount of toxic air pollution coming out of their smokestacks, and that means cleaning up pollution from dirty coal plants.

Fortunately, the Environmental Protection Agency's mission is to develop and enforce much needed safeguards to keep polluters from making us sick.

The EPA's forthcoming "Mercury, Arsenic, and Dioxin Reduction Rule" is expected to save thousands of lives per year; it will help prevent disease, avoid hospitalizations, and create new jobs installing and operating the much-needed pollution control equipment.

The Need for a Strong Air Toxics Standard for Power Plants

For decades, the power sector has successfully fought Clean Air Act requirements to reduce the toxic air emissions from their facilities. It's past time to stand up to polluters, and defend public health.

As required by the Clean Air Act, EPA must set air toxics emissions limits for new sources based on the pollution reductions already achieved by the best performing similar source, and for existing sources based on the actual performance of the average of the top 12 percent of existing sources. This straightforward approach can produce emissions standards that are both reasonable and effective in reducing air pollution and protecting public health. It also provides a level economic playing field, ensuring that power plants with good pollution controls are not at an economic or price disadvantage to competitors with no controls.

We know, from empirical evidence gathered after states have regulated air emissions of mercury, that deep reductions in fish tissue mercury levels result very quickly from reductions in mercury emissions from nearby sources.

How the Air Toxics Rules Work

Under EPA's forthcoming Air Toxics safeguard for power plants, new power plants will be required to reduce their hazardous air pollution to match the best-performing and cleanest plants for each type of pollutant, beginning as soon as the rule is finalized. Existing power plants will have more time, up to 3 or in some cases, even 4 years, to meet the standard.

We Need Strong Air Toxics Protections from EPA

In the 40 years since Americans demanded its creation, EPA has saved millions of lives by enforcing clean air and water standards. More than 1.7 million asthma attacks and \$110 billion in healthcare costs were avoided in 2010 alone thanks to the agency's efforts.

A strong air toxics safeguard from EPA will protect American families from life-threatening air pollution, help clean up our air, and create jobs.