

## PENNSYLVANIA FOCUS

Review &amp; Opinion

**Mercury debate is tainted by scare tactics**

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The state Department of Environmental Protection is planning to implement mercury emission regulations for electric utility companies that would go above and beyond federal requirements.

As one of the groups involved in a process designed to provide DEP with input as the proposed regulations are developed, the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry has made clear its opposition to this "go it alone" approach. A state mercury program would have no real health benefit over federal regulations, but would likely lead to higher energy bills and could result in lost jobs for Pennsylvania.

Because neither air nor water respect state borders, a nationwide control strategy makes the most sense and is the approach supported by the business community.

Earlier this year, the United States became the only nation in the world to adopt standards for controlling mercury emissions with the enactment of the Clear Air Interstate Rule and the Clean Mercury Rule. When fully implemented, mercury emissions will be reduced nationally by 70 percent. However, Pennsylvania faces more stringent requirements under the federal regulations. Mercury emissions in the state will be reduced by 86 percent.

A state program would provide little additional benefit. It would, however, inflict higher costs on Pennsylvania's power generators, who would likely pass the cost of complying with state regulations to consumers in the form of higher electric bills. A "go it alone" approach could push up the cost of natural gas as well, with many producers switching to that energy source if they find it cost effective to do so.

Because Pennsylvania's energy producers compete on the open market, any proposal that makes our electricity more expensive than other states' threatens our competitiveness and, consequently, jobs at Pennsylvania utilities.

At a time when Pennsylvania continues to struggle to compete for jobs, we can ill afford adding to the cost burden of our business base when no commensurate health benefit for Pennsylvania residents can be demonstrated.

The mercury issue is no doubt serious to all parties involved in the debate. Unfortunately, certain environmental groups have chosen to corrupt the process and confuse the issue with a deliberate campaign of scare tactics and misinformation, particularly on the health threat posed by mercury exposure.

The consumption of fish has been identified as one method by which mercury enters our bloodstream. However, claims from environmental activists that nationally more than half a million babies are born each year with mercury poisoning are irresponsible and wrong. That would mean approximately 19,000 babies would be born in Pennsylvania in this condition. Research by the Hospital and Healthsystem Association shows that out of six million hospitalizations in Pennsylvania from 2002 to 2004, there were eight hospitalizations for mercury poisoning, most of these self-inflicted (i.e. drug overdoses) and none from eating fish.

The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently found that all American women of child-bearing age are many times below exposure levels even theorized as posing a risk of detrimental effects for either themselves or their children. The CDC report stated that "finding a measurable amount of mercury in blood or urine does not mean that the level of mercury causes an adverse health effect."

Put another way, the blood of 100 percent of the women and children studied had mercury levels significantly below the threshold for any known risk.

Distorting facts to make up for a lack of evidence supporting the need for additional regulations does nothing to improve public dialogue on mercury and is disingenuous to the mercury stakeholder process. GENE BARR is vice president of political and regulatory affairs for the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry.

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