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## **Making Fish Healthier to Eat: EPA Proposal Raises Hurdles**

By Kathleen Schuler and David Wallinga, MD

Envision a world where it's safe to eat as much as you want of any kind of fish. That world is possible, but we have a long way to go.

Pregnant women should be able to take advantage of fish as a healthy source of protein and omega-3 fats, which, in addition to being heart protective, contribute to healthy brain development in fetuses and growing children.

But widespread pollution in Minnesota, as in other states, has prompted statewide fish consumption advisories based on mercury. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin. Even small amounts of mercury can affect developing brains. A woman's consumption of mercury-contaminated fish can contribute to learning or behavior problems in her offspring.

Concerns about mercury have led the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently to issue joint advice on fish consumption, targeting women of childbearing age and children. Generally, they advise eating no more than 12 oz per week of all fish. Strictly following the EPA's health-based guidelines, however, a child should eat no more than a single tuna fish sandwich per week, assuming it's lower mercury canned chunk light tuna. The EPA also recently doubled -- from 320,000 to 630,000 -- its estimate of the number of newborns each year at risk for suffering adverse effects on learning and development due to their mother's elevated mercury levels while pregnant.

While these government agencies acknowledge that mercury exposure threatens child development, their response is largely limited to reducing exposure -- i.e. warning women to watch the fish they eat -- putting the burden on the individual to tackle the problem. EPA's response on reducing mercury pollution at its source has been weak, at best.

In January 2004 the EPA, the same agency that warns us about mercury in fish, released proposed rules regulating mercury emissions from coal plants that allow seven times more mercury to be emitted into the environment in the next few years than the Clean Air Act allows. So, let's get this straight. The federal agency responsible for protecting the environment is telling us "Watch out for mercury in fish!" But they are also saying it's okay to let an extra 29 tons of mercury a year into the environment. Just a seventieth of a teaspoon of mercury deposited to a 20-acre lake each year is enough to contaminate the fish in that lake rendering them unfit to eat. So, what's going on?

It's apparent that energy and utility companies are resisting regulation at all costs. Forty-two percent of the nation's mercury air emissions come from coal-fired power plants. While other sources of mercury emissions are regulated, the nation's 1,100 coal plants emitting 48 tons of mercury a year, remain the largest source of unregulated mercury emissions.

The 1970 Clean Air Act exempted older coal plants from many of the regulations imposed on new plants, including mercury emissions control. The 1990 amendments to the Act required the EPA to promulgate rules to regulate coal plant mercury emissions. Fourteen years later, the EPA has finally proposed rules that provide coal plants with yet more relief from regulation. While the Clean Air Act requires a 90% reduction in mercury emissions by 2008, the proposed EPA rules would achieve only a 29% reduction by 2008 and a 70% reduction by 2018, a full ten years later than the law requires and that EPA itself says is possible with current technology.

We are told that coal is a cheap source of energy. But that doesn't take into account the true costs to the public from burning coal. These include the habitat destroyed in mining, air pollution and its contribution to asthma and other lung diseases, contamination of fish, and the costs to society of children with learning and behavioral disabilities, from their special education programs to the lower level of work productivity they will achieve as adults.

Now, let's try again envisioning a world where it's safe to eat as much fish as you want. That world is possible, if the EPA would only listen to the hundreds of thousands of citizens who have already written to urge them to make coal plants comply with the Clean Air Act.

*Schuler of Minneapolis is an environmental scientist with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Wallinga, of St. Paul, is a physician and food safety specialist with the Institute.*