

**Statement to the Office of Management and Budget  
Regarding the Mercury and Air Toxics Standard**

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On behalf of PSR's 33,000 members, plus our fellow health and medical organizations, we are profoundly concerned about the deadly toxic substances that Paul mentioned that pollute the air when power plants burn oil and coal to produce electricity. I'd like to say a few more words specifically about mercury.

[As we have heard,] Mercury is a well-known neurotoxin, dangerous in very small doses, capable of causing profound and permanent developmental and neurological delays to babies exposed in utero. After mercury exits power plant smokestacks, it falls from the air in rain and other precipitation in a process known as deposition. As it does so, it contaminates rivers, streams, lakes and bays, where it enters the food chain.

I'd like to remind us that in addition to mercury deposition, the same power plants that emit mercury and hazardous air pollutants into the air, also discharge millions of gallons of wastewater each day. This polluted wastewater is loaded with toxic pollutants, including mercury, from coal ash and smokestack scrubber sludge. So the initially airborne mercury that falls into waterways by deposition is actually just one part of power plants' cumulative contamination of surface waters.

In the water, Mercury bioaccumulates, meaning it builds up in animal tissue. As larger animals eat smaller ones, from worms and snails to fish, their bodies store this toxic substance, resulting in greater concentrations that work their way up the food chain. We humans eat at the top of the food chain, making consumption of mercury-contaminated fish the most common pathway of human mercury exposure.

This bioaccumulation results in a significant risk to people who eat contaminated fish. Most at risk are babies in utero. It has been estimated that every year 300,000 to 600,000 infants are born at risk for brain development defects because of their mothers' elevated blood mercury levels. Exposure at those levels is associated with significant, permanent and irreversible loss of IQ. This loss of brain capacity is a tragic burden for families and a loss to the entire nation.

Families in many communities of color, including African-Americans and Native peoples, rely on fishing to supply basic nutritional needs. Fishing can provide an inexpensive and healthful food source, but when fish are contaminated, reliance on fishing for food poses increased health risks. This makes subsistence fishing communities far more vulnerable to mercury effects than the general population. Compounding this risk is that fact that communities of color and low-income communities frequently have limited access to health care, allowing adverse impacts to go unaddressed. In other words, mercury contamination from oil- and coal-fired power plants is an Environmental Justice issue.

This is why the organizations here on the call today, as well as multiple collegial health organizations, sent Administrator Regan a letter in July of this year, calling on EPA to restore the “appropriate” finding and strengthen the MATS rule. *Strengthening* the MATS rule will ensure that *all* communities are better protected from the full range of hazardous air pollutants that power plants emit. Data collected under the MATS rule show that power plants are able to achieve much lower emission rates of mercury, hazardous air pollutants, and acid gases than the rule currently requires. Plants could reduce their emissions at reasonable cost by upgrading or improving the performance of their installed control technology, running their pollution controls during startup, and utilizing continuous-emission monitors to address elevated emissions in real time. Plants should also be subject to monitoring requirements and numeric limits for their emissions of hazardous “organic” pollutants like benzene and formaldehyde, which are not subject to any numeric emission limits at all under the current rule.

We call on the EPA and count on the EPA to take these steps. Human health will benefit, fewer children will experience neurological and other damage, and the toxic burden on communities, including communities of color and low-income communities, will be reduced. Thank you.