



Mackinac Center: Gov.'s Mercury Standard Not Based In Reality

A new Mackinac Center for Public Policy reported issued today argues that state-mandated reductions in mercury emissions would impose significant costs on the Michigan economy without benefiting the public health or the environment.

The report, "Assessing Stricter Mercury Controls in Michigan," examines the sources of mercury in the state, the scientific facts about the risks for mercury exposure and the likely impact of mandated reductions on future mercury levels. The study comes on the heels of a Gov. Jennifer Granholm directive to the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to draft rules forcing coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury emissions by 90 percent — a rate that is more restrictive than federal requirements.

"Only about 2 percent of the 4 tons of mercury deposited annually in Michigan is the result of emissions from in-state utilities," said Diane KATZ, the Center's director of science, environment and technology policy. "The reduction target of 90 percent is arbitrary; it is not based on the risk of exposure, the availability of emissions control technology, or the cost-effectiveness of emissions reductions."

Katz co-authored the report with Jon HEUSS, principal scientist for Air Improvement Resource Inc., a Novi environmental consulting firm. The report also found that the Granholm directive would prove to be significantly more costly than the federal program and provide no additional benefits.

"The state would do better to postpone mercury control requirements that exceed the federal standards and cooperate with neighboring states and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to better define the risks associated with mercury exposures. We need to improve our understanding of the interplay between mercury emissions, depositions and bioaccumulation."

The mercury debate has also moved into the Legislature, with the Senate moving legislation on Nov. 30 that ban the sale of certain products that contain mercury, such as thermostats and blood pressure monitors (See "Identity Theft Laws Tightened," 11/30/06).

In an interview earlier this year, Dr. Leonard LEVIN, manager of the Air Toxics Health and Risk Assessment Project with the Electric Power Research Institute, told *MIRS* that totally eliminating the mercury emissions from Michigan's power plants would have little effect on public health.

"In terms of human health changes it would have very little effect," Levin explained of a total elimination of power plant mercury. "The modeling that the EPA has done shows that the difference in human exposure, the amount of mercury that is the blood of women of child bearing age — the subpopulation that is most sensitive — that amount of mercury would only decline by a percent or two at most."

Levin said mercury is a chemical element that occurs

throughout the environment. It's associated with minerals and rocks in the earth's crust. Only about 25 to 33 percent of the mercury in the environment is caused by man-made activity.

"The rest of it is new mercury from the earth's crust, from volcanoes, different events and rocks and minerals," Levin added.

Of the mercury emissions over Michigan, most are coming from upwind (west of the state) and it "is not dominated by utility sources."

Hugh McDIARMID, communications director for the Michigan Environmental Council (MEC) called the Mackinac Report "tired old industry scare tactics."

"Current studies and real-world experiences show reductions in mercury from power plants significantly cut the amount of this poison that falls to the water and earth nearby," McDiarmid said. "In Florida, for example, concentrations in fish and wading birds dropped 60 to 70 percent in a single generation in the wake of aggressive state-mandated mercury reductions in the 1980s and '90s."

McDiarmid also noted that a National Wildlife Federation study estimated the typical residential electric ratepayer would see an increase of roughly 69 cents monthly, if that, as a result of the Michigan reductions.

"Balanced against mercury's crippling effect on the state's \$4 billion sport fishery, its tremendous health care toll, and the heartache of children born with neurological problems, it's a no-brainer for Michigan to be a leader, rather than a follower of weak federal mercury reduction plans that are currently under legal attack as not being adequately protective of human health," he added.

Bob McCANN, press secretary for the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), said he'd take exception to the main point of the Mackinac Center report that seems to argue the state is doing something that it shouldn't be doing.

"Mercury has been proven time and time again to be a very potent neuro-toxin," McCann told *MIRS*. "It can have dramatic effects particularly on children and women who may be pregnant."

McCann argued that Michigan wasn't alone in opposing the EPA's mercury standard. Many other states also opposed the federal standard and are pushing their own standards.

"Some of them are more aggressive," said McCann noting that New Jersey is imposing a 90 percent reduction by 2007 as is Massachusetts (2008), Connecticut (2009) and Minnesota (2009). He added that Illinois and Pennsylvania are also in the process of putting a similar rule together, but they have no date yet.

"The reason Michigan is going out to 2015 is because we're in a different place," McCann said. "We rely almost exclusively on coal-based power." The DEQ official also noted that a power plant put in by Wisconsin Energy in Presque Isle demonstrated a 90 percent reduction in emissions, so the technology is out there.