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Bush Administration Confirms – Wisconsin Fish Mercury- Contaminated

Even with proof, Bush administration continues call for weaker mercury control rules

Madison, WI—Recent U.S. EPA tests of fish caught in Wisconsin’s lakes found every fish tested positive for mercury contamination at levels that exceed EPA’s “safe” limit for women of childbearing age.

“Anyone who eats fish caught from Wisconsin’s waters deserves better. This will not only hurt local anglers, but also Wisconsin’s tourism economy. The Bush administration is going the wrong way in solving the mercury problem,” said WISPIRG State Director Jennifer Giegerich

Nationally, for the recommended two-meal-per-week diet, 55 percent of the fish samples exceeded EPA’s safe mercury limit for women and 76 percent exceeded the safe limit for children under age three.

“Now, both the FDA and the EPA say the mercury problem is much worse than anyone knew. If we know Wisconsin fish have too much mercury, why is the Bush administration calling for weaker rules? Confirmed evidence like this should demand more action, not less,” said Eric Uram, Midwest Representative of the Sierra Club.

“Reel Danger: Power Plant Mercury Emissions and the Fish We Eat,” a Clear the Air analysis of EPA data being released by WISPIRG, comes as the Bush administration prepares to finalize a highly controversial proposal to delay meaningful reductions in mercury emissions from power plants until at least 2018. The Clean Air Act calls for the maximum achievable reductions of such emissions by 2008. The Bush plan, written at least in part by utility industry lobbyists, sparked unprecedented public opposition and a nationwide call for stringent and timely controls on mercury from power plants.

“Reel Danger” is based on the first available data from EPA’s ongoing National Study of Chemical Residues in Lake Fish Tissue. From 1999-2001, EPA collected approximately two composite samples, one each of a predator fish species and a bottom-dwelling fish species at 260 lakes, for a total of 520 composite samples, or 2,547 fish.

Key findings include the following:

- All of the fish samples EPA tested nationwide, including those in Wisconsin, were contaminated with mercury.
- In Wisconsin, 100 percent of the fish samples contained mercury levels that exceed EPA’s “safe” limit for women of average weight who eat fish twice per week.

- Nationwide, 55 percent of the fish samples exceeded the safe mercury limit for women and 76 percent exceeded the safe limit for children of average weight under age three who eat fish twice a week.
- Predator fish, including smallmouth bass, walleye, largemouth bass, lake trout, and Northern pike, had the highest average mercury concentrations.

The report also looks at over 2000 fish tested by the State of Wisconsin and found that 90 percent of largemouth bass, 84 percent of Northern pike, 90 percent of smallmouth bass, and 92 percent of walleye tested exceeded the safe mercury limit for women.

“Like many Wisconsin fisherman, I’m disturbed that I shouldn’t eat the fish I catch. Fishing is not just about being in the water, it is about having your family be able to eat the fish and enjoy it with you,” said Jeff DuPuy, a recreational fisherman from Milwaukee. “President Bush should be standing up for folks like me and not casting his line with big polluters,” said DuPuy.

Mercury is toxic to the developing brain, and exposure in the womb can cause learning disabilities, developmental delays, and other serious health problems in children. EPA estimates that one woman in six of childbearing age have enough mercury in her blood to put her child at risk. Eating contaminated fish is the primary way people get exposed to mercury.

Coal-fired power plants are the single largest source of mercury emissions. Other industrial sources have reduced their emissions of mercury by more than 90 percent within a few short years, but power plants continue to emit unlimited amounts of mercury into the air. Currently-available technology can reduce power plant mercury emissions by 90 percent or better.

Wisconsin ranks 13th nationally for mercury emissions from power plants, releasing 2,615 pounds of mercury into the air in 2002, according to the most recent EPA data. Pleasant Prairie Power Plant in Kenosha alone emitted 838 pounds of mercury into the air in 2002, ranking the plant 14th out of nearly 500 plants nationwide for the highest mercury emissions.

“Senators Feingold and Kohl has already joined 44 of their colleagues in sending a letter to EPA Administrator Leavitt opposing the EPA proposal. They should take every opportunity to publicly oppose the Bush administration’s mercury plan and press the Administration to reduce mercury emissions from power plants by 90 percent by 2008,” Giegerich concluded.

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