



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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Lawmakers Push for Tougher Standards on Mercury Pollution

(Madison)—Several members of the Wisconsin Legislature joined with counterparts in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio today to push for regional cooperation to fight for tougher standards on mercury pollution. Mercury is a persistent, bio-accumulative toxin that poses a significant risk to human health, wildlife and the environment, and can damage the brains of developing fetuses and children.

The extent of the mercury contamination problem was recently highlighted by the Environmental Protection Agency, which recently doubled its estimate of babies born with elevated mercury levels in their blood. The new data estimates that 630,000 infants are born in the United States each year with blood mercury levels that could double the risk of poor brain development.

Rep. Joe Plouff (D-Menomonie), Rep. Mark Miller (D-Madison), Rep. Sody Pope-Roberts (D-Verona), Rep. Spencer Black and Sen. Bob Wirch (D-Pleasant Prairie) held a press conference in the capitol today to address the need for action. All five are members of the National Conference of Environmental Legislators (NCEL), a national bi-partisan organization committed to protecting the environment.

NCEL organized the regional press conferences in response to action taken by the United States Environmental Protection Agency in December of 2003 when they announced that it would not control mercury from coal-fired power plants as a hazardous pollutant; a move some say violates the Clean Air Act.

Mercury from coal-fired power plants accounts for nearly one-third of all man-made mercury emissions. Last year Connecticut became the first state in the country to limit mercury emissions by law and Massachusetts and New Hampshire are currently working on new regulations.

The actions taken by the Wisconsin Legislators included a request that the Department of Natural Resources resubmit tougher rules on mercury emissions from state power plants, a ban on mercury thermostats in new construction projects and a request that the DNR formulate a plan to increase public awareness on the hazards posed by mercury pollution while increasing efforts to reclaim mercury from products that are currently being shipped to landfills.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has been working on new rules for coal-fired power plants that would reduce emissions by 80% by 2015. The rules process has been bogged down since late December and they need to be reintroduced to the legislature by the Natural Resources Board in order to spur on the process.

The ban on mercury thermostats involves banning a product that has viable alternatives without the use of mercury. There are many other products that contain mercury, including florescent lights, which too often end up in landfills and contribute to mercury contamination.

In addition to comments made by the legislators, George Meyer from the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Dr. Peggy Scallon from Physicians for Social Responsibility and Sarah Streed from Wisconsin Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign all addressed the need to take action. Representatives from the Sierra Club, Clean Wisconsin, Trout Unlimited, WISPIRG and SERC were also on hand.