



Setting ^{THE} record straight

Nov. 16, 2006

Misconceptions abound in mercury regulation debate, *Part 1*

The Independent Regulatory Review Commission voted 3-2 to approve an unnecessary and costly state mercury regulation plan. Developed by the Department of Environmental Protection, it provides no commensurate health benefit beyond the stringent and responsible federally established program, but will lead to higher energy costs for consumers and will threaten jobs and generation within the electric utility industry. With the facts – and leveler heads – all but ignored throughout the debate, environmental groups have made the case for this misguided policy by erroneously proclaiming a mercury health “crisis” in the state and nation.

Alarmist claims can adversely affect health

It's rather ironic then, that recent studies show that these alarmist claims can actually adversely affect health. Two recent studies, one by the Harvard School of Public Health and another by the Institute of Medicine, have found that the health benefits of eating fish outweigh whatever minimal risk exists from the mercury in that fish. Fish consumption can reduce heart disease and bring other positive health benefits. Fish is a good source of high-quality protein and other nutrients, and is low in fat. For middle-aged and older men, and women after menopause, the benefits of eating fish far outweigh the risks within the established Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines. This isn't to imply that risks should be ignored, but the federal requirements responsibly address these concerns. In scaring people from eating fish, environmentalists are actually doing a disservice to human health.

Everything in moderation

Like many other foods, some precautions should be taken. Some larger fish that tend to be higher in mercury should be avoided by pregnant women and women of childbearing age. Nonetheless, environmentalists' claims that the EPA and FDA have said that hundreds of thousands have unsafe levels of mercury in their blood or that hundreds of thousands of children are born with unsafe levels are untrue. Nowhere on the websites of these two agencies will you find those numbers. The most EPA has said is that 300,000 women **may be** at elevated risk, but their blood levels **are not** unsafe. The Centers for Disease Control confirms this as well.

In addressing the health risks of mercury, the lead author of the Harvard study said, “We were surprised at how little evidence there actually is for some of these harms.” An official with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in commenting on the Institute of Medicine study, echoed that sentiment, saying that public concerns about the risks are “overblown” and based on “fear and misinformation.”

The next ‘apple scare?’

It's little wonder that one state senator considering the regulation issue questioned whether mercury was going to be the next “Alar.” History has since revealed that the voluntary removal of Alar from the market was only necessary for anyone planning to consume thousands of gallons of apple juice per day for life. But nonetheless, the apple hysteria of the 1980s led many to falsely believe that children were being harmed by fruits and vegetables, much as is being done with fish consumption today.

Environmental groups need to be held accountable

Policy changes as sweeping as mercury regulation deserve an honest debate. Scare tactics, alarmist claims and just plain false information designed to take away from the real issue is disingenuous to the process. So is the fact that environmentalists have been allowed to use these tactics with little question. At the heart of the mercury regulation issue is whether or not the Commonwealth should adopt a plan for which there is no commensurate health benefits above the already established and stringent federal program, but which risks jobs and electric generating capacity, and will lead to higher consumer costs. No evidence has been presented that suggests doing so is good public policy.

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The Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry is the state's largest broad-based business association, with its membership representing more than 50 percent of the private workforce. More information is available on the Chamber's website at www.pachamber.org