



# Setting THE record straight

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*Misconceptions abound in environmental issues debate, Part 2*

## Open and honest debate?

During the 2005-06 legislative session, a major environmental initiative – mercury regulation – took center stage in the General Assembly. The issue has significant implications for businesses and consumers in the Commonwealth. As such, it deserved an open and honest debate, as does any issue coming before the legislature. Lawmakers attempted to address the issue in this manner, but their efforts were thwarted when environmentalists' campaign of fear and misinformation was allowed to rule the debate. As alarming as the tactics used by environmental groups was the willingness of many to take their claims at face value.

### Who needs facts when you have fear?

**Whether or not mercury should be regulated – it should – was never at issue. The debate centered on finding the best approach for controlling mercury**, of which more than 50 percent occurs naturally and which does not respect state borders.

**No evidence was ever presented by the Department of Environmental Protection and supporters of its plan that going beyond the stringent federal mercury rule will have any additional benefit to human health and the environment.** A coalition of labor and business groups, and those in the electric generation industry – even the state's Public Utility Commission chairman – all warned that the state-specific plan could seriously impact the cost and reliability of electricity with again, no commensurate benefit.

So why did the lack of evidence for the need for a potentially costly (the incremental cost to electric generators and consumers of going beyond the federal rule is estimated at \$1.7 billion) and unnecessary state-specific plan not seem to matter?

Because nobody knows better than certain environmental groups that faced with no supporting evidence, nothing gets public opinion on your side like fear. Among the unsubstantiated claims from environmentalists was that nationally, more than half a million babies are born each year with mercury poisoning. Such a statement means that approximately 19,000 babies would be born in Pennsylvania in this condition. Research by the Hospital and Healthsystem Association shows that out of six million hospitalizations in Pennsylvania for the period 2002-04, there were just eight hospitalizations for mercury poisoning, most of these self-inflicted (i.e. drug overdoses) and none related to poisoning from eating fish, the most common way mercury enters the bloodstream. This claim – one of many like it – is irresponsible and simply wrong.

The problem this presents to an open and honest debate on the issue – any issue – is that once the fear factor train gets rolling, not even the facts aren't enough to stop it. Lost in the mix of unsubstantiated claim after unsubstantiated claim was the question fundamental to the mercury regulation debate: why risk jobs and electric generation, and pave the way for higher consumer costs, if there is no additional benefit of going beyond the responsible federal program? That question was never adequately answered, and perhaps more disappointingly, it didn't seem to matter.

### Open and honest debate!

Developing workable, effective solutions to the concerns facing the Commonwealth should be done based on fact and reason, not emotion. More and more, particularly when it comes to environmental issues, the latter is being allowed to drive the debate. Environmental groups need to be held to the same level of scrutiny and accountability for their claims as is required of the lawmakers whose job it is to develop state policy, and all groups involved in the debate.

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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](http://www.pachamber.org)*