

A Huge and Long Overdue Win for Public Health

By FRED KRUPP

Environmental Defense Fund It is one of the most important public health measures in a generation, one that will save tens of thousands of American lives. It will protect the IQ of countless American kids, and help clear the air for the millions of Americans with asthma. It may be the biggest health story you've never heard of. I'm referring to the ruling the Obama administration unveiled Dec. 21 to control toxic mercury pollution from coal-burning power plants. These rules have been 21 years in the making, and now, at long last, they will bring Americans some relief from a pervasive toxin. The United States has always shown good sense when taking on hazardous substances in our environment. We banned DDT in the 1970s after learning that this pesticide was killing birds of prey. We banned lead in gasoline and paint after scientific research proved it was harming our children. We joined the world in banning CFC refrigerants after scientists demonstrated they were depleting the Earth's ozone layer. And we took strong action to reduce sulfur emissions from coal plants, which were poisoning our forests and lakes with acid rain. Now we have taken aim at another Public Enemy: mercury. The president deserves enormous credit for sticking with his plan despite furious opposition from some in the power industry and their allies on Capitol Hill. Why is this such a big deal? For many Americans, it may come as a surprise that mercury contamination is even a problem. Moms will know that doctors warn against eating too much canned tuna, but may not be sure how the mercury gets in the fish. But make no mistake: this is a public health emergency of the first order, and it starts with coal-fired power plants. Every year, U.S. power plants release almost 50 tons of mercury into the environment. When coal is burned, some of the mercury in it deposits locally and some can travel hundreds of miles to contaminate rivers, lakes, animals, plants and ultimately our bodies. Mercury is highly toxic. Mercury exposure, especially in infants and children and developing fetuses, can lead to serious neurological problems, including impacts on thinking, memory, language and fine motor skills. Scientists at New York's Mount Sinai Center for Children's Health and the Environment have estimated that mercury exposure causes reductions in intelligence for between 316,500 and 637,200 American children each year, and also cause disruptions in behavior. Most of these effects will last a lifetime. Many of the other toxic pollutants controlled by these rules - such as chromium, arsenic and dioxin - are known or probable carcinogens and can attack the brain, lungs, liver and kidneys. Industry lobbyists have always complained about measures to protect the environment and public health. The Clean Air Act would lead to the "collapse of entire industries," said the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971. Phasing out CFCs would kill the refrigeration business. Removing lead from gasoline would mean huge price hikes. Despite these wild predictions, the sky never fell, the American economy continued to prosper, and costs have been far outweighed by the public health benefits. The Clean Air Act, for example, has dramatically reduced asthma attacks, heart disease and other illnesses, saving trillions of dollars in health costs. In fact, for every dollar we spend under the Clean Air Act, we receive more than \$30 in benefits. Now some lobbyists are complaining again, about the new mercury and air toxics rule. They claim the rule will lead to blackouts and service cutbacks and cause consumers' bills to skyrocket and they complain that utilities don't have enough time to meet the new standards. President Obama and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson were right to stand firm on this rule. The new regulations will impose some costs, but they will save far more in public health benefits. And several recent studies, including one by the respected North American Electric Reliability Corp.,

have all concluded that the new rules will not cause electricity reliability problems. And here's what the coal lobbyists aren't telling you: -Canned albacore tuna has become so contaminated by mercury that children under six should be restricted to, at most, one meal a month. Children ages 6-12 should eat no more than two meals a month. -States in the Midwest are advising women of childbearing age, and young children, to never eat fish caught in the Great Lakes, because of contamination by mercury (among other pollutants). -All 48 of the continental United States had mercury fish consumption advisories as of March 2011. -Wildlife that prey heavily on fish, including loons, mink, otters, beluga whales in the Arctic and even polar bears in Greenland, are heavily contaminated. The new mercury and air toxics rule has been in the works since 1990 - long enough for the electric utilities to prepare. Many, to their credit, have done just that, and they support the new rules. But a few outliers didn't make the necessary investments, betting they could endlessly delay the new rules. They are the ones making the most noise and spending the most money. In the last two quarters alone, for example, American Electric Power Co. spent millions lobbying Congress to weaken and delay clean air rules. Sorry, time's up. Twenty-one years is long enough to wait for such a big, life-saving win. ABOUT THE WRITER Fred Krupp is president of the Environmental Defense Fund. He wrote this for McClatchy-Tribune News Service. This essay is available to McClatchy-Tribune News Service subscribers. McClatchy-Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of McClatchy-Tribune or its editors. 2011, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services

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