

Mercury Pollution in Coastal Georgia – A Threat to Both Health & Business

Mercury is the most common, and arguably the most dangerous, pollutant most often found in Georgia's contaminated fish. This material is a harmful neuro-toxin that damages the nervous system, and it accumulates in the body over time – older fish have larger amounts, and the longer people are exposed to it, the more mercury is likely to seriously harm them and their offspring.

There are at least fifty known mercury contamination problems within Georgia's coastal waters, and likely many more that have yet to be identified. Based on DNR's fish consumption advisory handbook (quaintly masked under the title "Guidelines for Eating Fish from Georgia Waters"), the number of known mercury-contaminated fish in coastal Georgia is about seven times greater in proportion to geographic area than for Georgia overall.

This is because microbes that flourish in coastal rivers (with naturally higher acidity and suspended organic materials)

readily convert this pollutant to methyl mercury, mercury's most toxic form that is quickly absorbed into the tissue of fish and all who eat it.

Reducing mercury pollution will improve public health and also help sustain our billion-dollar-a-year nature-based economy here in coastal Georgia. By allowing industries that generate this toxin to continue emitting it above acceptable limits, we are continuing to make the problems worse.

Some proposed federal policy would essentially shift the costs of industrial operations onto the public, with dire health implications, especially for children of mothers who have been exposed to mercury. This unconscionable pollution will therefore undoubtedly leave thousands of children "behind" – for life.

At the same time, policies that allow dirty power plants to contaminate fish are a direct threat to nature-based businesses here – including recreational fishing worth over \$500 million annually,

according to a study done by Georgia Southern University for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Continued accommodation of mercury polluters is completely unjustified when practical alternatives are available. For the health of both our economy and our people, EPA has established new controls on mercury, but some pre-existing polluters are delaying actions to clean up their operations.

It remains to be seen if those who control federal policy will meet their obligation to protect the public interest instead of pandering to backroom lobbyists.

This is one of many environmental issues where both conservationists and small business owners share good reasons to reform policies that favor only the narrow interests of a few major corporations.

The Southern Company and other pollution giants must be required to recognize their responsibility to the public as much as their profit motives. Until then, the political power behind power production will remain dangerously at odds with public interest.

What you can do: (1) Ask your Congressional representatives to stop all subsidies for coal-burning power plants. (2) Join in opposing the construction of new coal-fired power plants whenever they're proposed.

Mercury Pollution Overview

Derived in part from a statement by the National Wildlife Federation

- The EPA must stand strong and work to enforce regulations for coal-fired power plants, which need to be rigorously implemented to meet reasonable federal standards for clean air.
- Such regulation is appropriate and necessary to protect public health and nature-based businesses from the well-documented risks of mercury contamination.
- Coal-fired power plants in the U.S. are the largest major source of mercury emissions, polluting our air, land, water, and wildlife with approximately 100,000 pounds of mercury each year.
- Annual additions of mercury as little as 1/70th of a teaspoon can contaminate a 20-acre lake to the point that the fish are unsafe to eat.
- Pollution from power plants travels great distances – 40% of it goes 600 miles or more beyond the location of emission.
- At least a dozen coal-burning power plants degrading coastal Georgia are within that range, spread across Georgia and three other states: Alabama, Tennessee, and South Carolina.
- Georgia EPD continues to issue permits for new coal-fired power plants despite their burden on public health and significant hidden costs to consumers and tax-payers.
- The Center is part of a collaborative statewide effort to stop new coal-fired power plants in Georgia. We urge your support of this campaign.