

Leaden pace of mercury rules pollutes Maine

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Abstract (Summary)

Stemming mercury pollution has dire local consequences, yet requires overdue national regulations on coal-fired power plants beyond cap and trade. Having two of five mercury hot spots within our borders cements the responsibility of Maine officials to aggressively, and ceaselessly, press the federal government for stronger controls.

Today, a new study naming the Androscoggin River one of five mercury "hot spots" in the Northeast was released in Washington, D.C. The BioDiversity Research Institute of Gorham, Maine's most diligent mercury watcher, is a lead author of the report, which is billed as the most "comprehensive analysis of mercury accumulation ever conducted in the U.S.," according to the Washington Post.

Full Text (482 words)

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Mythologically speaking, the god Mercury screamed along from place to place, his speed secured from winged footwear. The element named for the fleet Roman deity of trade and travel also moves swiftly, cutting a swath through the atmosphere, rivers, lakes and bloodstreams of Maine, its people, and its wildlife.

Yet while mercury moves with haste, the enforcement of environmental protection by federal agencies, lawmakers and the judiciary is regrettably leaden.

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Both the Androscoggin and the Kennebec rivers in Maine earned top-five billing as a repository for mercury, joining the Adirondack region of New York State, the Merrimack River in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and central Nova Scotia.

Usual suspects are blamed: coal-fired power plants that blast toxins into the air, and recalcitrance by the Environmental Protection Agency to insist on tough federal standards on the nation's heinous mercury polluters.

Maine was one of 11 states objecting to controversial "cap and trade" rules instituted by the EPA in 2005, which allows power plants to swap pollution credits to reach goals of mercury reduction by 2025, instead of strict, uniform regulations the mercury emitters would otherwise face under the Clean Air Act.

Study authors say their findings dispute claims of cap and trade as a pollution inhibitor, as uneven enforcement of emissions will perpetuate further hot spots. The U.S., to its credit, is the first nation to enact mercury controls for coal-fired power plants, though it's clear stricter controls remain necessary.

Maine is central in the debate over mercury contamination, as unhealthy levels in its wildlife - especially its trademark loons, one of the first species to become identified with mercury pollution - have become national symbols of the pollutant's feared impact.

Pollution in the Androscoggin and Kennebec is well-known, with the Penobscot River also deserving mention. Earlier this month, a federal appeals court finally upheld a 2002 order compelling the owner of a shuttered riverside chlorine plant in Orrington to fund a study of mercury pollution in Penobscot.

The enactment of the EPA regulations is slow, too, as the phases of cap and trade - for pollution hot spots such as the Androscoggin - mean real progress on lowering mercury levels could fall to the next generation of Mainers.

Stemming mercury pollution has dire local consequences, yet requires overdue national regulations on coal-fired power plants beyond cap and trade. Having two of five mercury hot spots within our borders cements the responsibility of Maine officials to aggressively, and ceaselessly, press the federal government for stronger controls.

No matter how long it takes.