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## Mercury Threat to Kids Rising, Unreleased EPA Report Warns

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WASHINGTON -- A report warning that emissions of mercury by coal-fired power plants and other industrial sources poses an increasing health danger to young children has been delayed for nine months, while the Bush administration struggles with how to handle an increasingly contentious environmental problem.

The Environmental Protection Agency report is to be released soon, officials said, after being subjected to an unusual level of scrutiny by a half-dozen other federal agencies -- including the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy. But it isn't likely to settle the mercury question. Among pollutants the report studied, mercury is the only one for which levels aren't dropping.

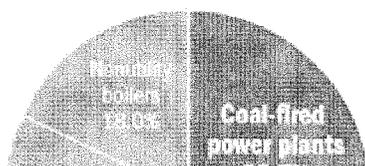
A partial draft, titled "America's Children and the Environment," notes that states increasingly are issuing warnings about dangerous mercury levels in fish. It says there is mounting evidence that mercury is collecting in the blood of women of child-bearing age.

The evidence is also increasing, warns the EPA report, that high doses of mercury can cause mental retardation and other neurological disorders in infants. The report updates a 2000 version by the Clinton Administration that included no findings on mercury.

Reducing mercury emissions has become a battle both in the Bush administration and in Congress. President Bush has proposed legislation called the Clear Skies Act that, among other things, would require industry to cut mercury emissions in two steps: by 50% by 2010, and by 70% by 2018.

### UP IN SMOKE

Breakdown of mercury emissions in the U.S., 1994-95\*



But the coal-mining industry and some coal-fired electric utilities are working to weaken the reductions. Environmental groups, meanwhile, want steeper cuts.

"For this administration, mercury has become a very sensitive issue," says Michael Magner, an analyst for the Public Education Center, a nonprofit, pro-environment research group, who provided the draft copy of the report, dated in October. People familiar with the final

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report, originally due last May, confirmed it finds that mercury poses a serious health problem for children.

The report notes that children are more exposed and vulnerable to mercury and other environmental pollutants because they play outside, and for their size they drink more water, eat more food and breathe more air than adults do.

Just when the final report will be released remains unclear. EPA spokesman Joe Martyak says the document is "at the printer" and "was well worth the effort." Sen. Barbara Boxer, who asked the EPA for the report in October, was skeptical of that time frame. "They have been sitting on this thing for months," says the California Democrat. "We're wasting precious days during which we could be strategizing on how to improve the health of our children."

Environmental-health experts both within EPA and in the larger health community are pressing for steeper cuts than in the Clear Skies proposal, arguing that unlike other pollutants, mercury is a persistent poison that tends to accumulate in the food chain, particularly in fish.

"Putting as much mercury in the biosphere as we do is something we're going to regret, I think, for a long, long time," says Amy D. Kyle, an environmental-health scientist at the University of California at Berkeley, and one of five authors of the EPA study. The authors reviewed the 2000 EPA report on children's environmental exposures, she said, and felt that mercury should be added "as a key issue."

The draft report notes that children born to women with blood concentrations of mercury above 5.8 parts per billion have a "higher risk of adverse health effects." About 8% of women of child-bearing age tested had "at least" that level of mercury in their blood during the years 1999 and 2000, it states. Other medical evidence has shown the risk is highest to fetuses and infants, while it isn't clear what hazards adults face from mercury.

Utilities and the coal-mining industry, who are key supporters of President Bush's energy plan, insist that trying to curb mercury emissions from coal will be economically and technologically difficult. "Right now there are no commercially available technologies for the control of mercury emissions," says Carol Raulston, a spokeswoman for the National Mining Association.

Her industry wants to postpone the proposed 70% cut, and she says technology already available to cut emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides may have the "co-benefit" of meeting the 50% interim cut in mercury emissions by 2010. "We don't want to attempt further cuts until we see how the technology develops," she says.

The utility industry, on the other hand, regards the 50% cut as "unrealistic," says Dan Riedinger, a spokesman for the Edison Electric Institute, the electric utilities' main trade association. The institute supports the 70% reduction by 2018, however.

Environmental groups expect a separate set of regulations being prepared by the EPA, under a provision of the Clean Air Act, to be stronger. The act, adopted in 1970, allows the EPA to regulate mercury when it views it as a health hazard, which it now does. Those regulations are scheduled to be announced in December, unless Congress adopts the Clear Skies Act, which would supersede them.

Clean Air regulations probably wouldn't allow companies to use emissions trading to soften the

financial cost of the new regulations, as Clear Skies would.

Under emissions trading, companies that reduce emissions below federal limits get credits, which they can then sell to companies that haven't. Such trading allows plant managers to phase out older equipment and finance the installation of new emissions-control equipment that can cost hundreds of millions of dollars for power plants.

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