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MERCURY POLLUTION

Mainers call on EPA to enforce Clean Air Act

An informal hearing was held by U.S. Rep. Tom Allen Monday.

BY BONNIE WASHUK
Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — Environmentalists, doctors, fisherman and mothers said Monday that mercury pollution is hurting Maine residents and wildlife. And experts warned that a Bush administration proposal will make the problem worse.

Speakers at an informal hearing here held by U.S. Rep. Tom Allen warned:

- Mercury pollution is directly attributable to a decline in the loon population in Maine.
- Maine bald eagles have the lowest reproductive rate in the nation.
- Maine has among the worst mercury pollution problem in the country: Every river, lake and stream carries public warnings to limit fish consumption due to mercury.
- Studies indicate that 10 to 20 percent of women of child-bearing age in Maine have blood levels of mercury considered too high for the safety of a developing fetus. The Maine numbers mirror the national rate. Exposure to mercury puts babies at risk of brain damage, learning disabilities and motor skill deficits.



ALLEN

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Allen told listeners that now more than ever, Maine needs the help promised by Congress when it passed the Clean Air Act in 1990. But a Bush administration plan would turn back the clock in two ways, he said.

It would give older Midwest-ern plants more years — maybe decades — before they have to stop polluting. And it would soften how mercury pollution is classified by the Environmental Protection Agency, allowing “credits” to be bought and sold by polluters.

Standing in front of a large, wooden green fish with the red words “Unsafe to eat” painted over it, Allen said the administration’s proposals are wrong, harmful to Maine and “illegal under the Clean Air Act.”

The EPA is taking public comment on the proposals until April 15. Allen said he re-

quested a hearing be held in Maine, but the EPA refused. So he staged the informal hearing at the State House, promising to deliver testimony to Washington, D.C.

Many of the at least 50 people in attendance had plenty to say Monday. “The EPA motto is ‘Protecting human health, safeguarding the environment,’” observed Marjorie Monteleon, whose two sons work in the fishing industry on Mount Desert Island. “I wonder when they’re going to do that? Only lawsuits seem to wake them up.”

Dr. Jim Maier, a Scarborough psychiatrist who has treated many youngsters with learning disabilities, said the situation is similar to Maine keeping close track of all its child sex predators, but then the federal government allowing other states to send their sexual predators here.

Instead of “No Child Left Behind,” the Bush administration’s motto should be: “No child left unexposed to toxics,” Maier complained.

Dr. Lani Graham, former director of Maine’s Bureau of Health, said she got a call about 10 years ago from a park worker who told her a fish in a pond in Acadia National Park had tested high for mercury. The worker asked if the pond should be posted.

That discovery, Graham said, eventually led to extensive testing of Maine’s waterways and fish consumption warnings being placed on inland water bodies. Graham called that period the most discouraging time for her. It’s vital, she said, that EPA “scrap these proposals and return to the Clean Air Act as written.”

If the EPA does not withdraw its proposal, Attorney General Steven Rowe said he and other states will sue the administration for violating the Clean Air Act.

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EPA's mercury proposal raises ire in Mainers

PPH
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● Residents warn of the harmful effects of mercury pollution at a hearing held to protest the softening of federal emissions rules.

By **MEREDITH GOAD**

Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — Dr. Lani Graham recalled Monday that she was “both shocked and frightened” when she learned more than a decade ago how much mercury had been accumulating in Acadia National Park.

Graham, who was Maine’s chief health officer at the time, had been notified by a park official that fish in one of Acadia’s lakes contained mercury at levels “many times what would be considered safe for a child to consume on a frequent basis.” She soon discovered the contamination was by no means unique, leading to statewide warnings about eating fish from Maine waters.

Graham, now a family physician who is active in public health issues, recounted her experience during a field hearing on a new mercury pollution rule proposed by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. She told U.S. Rep. Tom Allen, a Portland Democrat who hosted the event, that she was testifying “on behalf of the people of Maine, and particularly the children of Maine, who cannot speak for themselves.

“It is very sad that in these times, when childhood obesity is such a problem ... that any health official must issue warnings on the consumption of fish, widely respected as a healthy food, because it has become contaminated by our carelessness,” she said.



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Dr. Lani Graham

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that is considered a health risk to children and women of childbearing age. The Clinton administration labeled it a hazardous air pollutant that had to be regulated with the “maximum achievable control technology.” Under that standard, coal-fired power plants would have to reduce their mercury emissions by as much as 90 percent by the end of 2007.

Now, the EPA is considering a rule that would delay the first compliance deadline, requiring a 29 percent reduction by 2010 and a 69 percent reduction by 2018. It would also allow

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a "cap and trade" program that would let power plants buy and sell pollution credits.

Allen called the proposal "embarrassing." He said that in February a new EPA analysis found that 630,000 children are born in the United States with blood mercury levels higher than 5.8 parts per million.

"That's the level at which the risk of poor brain development is doubled," Allen said.

When the EPA declined to schedule a public hearing on the new mercury rule in New England - the closest hearing was in Philadelphia last week - Allen scheduled one of his own in Augusta and said he would turn over any testimony to the federal agency.

Marjorie Monteleon drove more than five hours round trip from her home in Southwest Harbor to let Allen know how she feels.

"What really gripes me is the EPA's motto is 'Protecting human health, safeguarding the natural environment,'" she said. "I wonder

when they're going to do that? It appears it is only lawsuits that seem to wake them up."

Dr. James Maier, a child and family psychotherapist from Scarborough, said mercury pollution is not just an academic issue for him because he's spent most of his professional life caring for "damaged kids" who "have been handicapped in school and life with various emotional and behavioral problems.

"Delaying the implementation of the existing technology means that countless more tons of mercury are going to be dumped on Maine, and how many IQ points does that subtract from Maine children?" he said. "That's an experiment I don't want my grandchild or other children to be a part of."

Susan Gallo, a biologist at Maine Audubon, focused on wildlife issues, noting that Maine loons have higher levels of mercury in their blood, feathers and eggs than loons in any other state.

Although she has long dealt with the mercury issue professionally, Gallo said the subject is "even more meaningful" to her now because she is pregnant.

"I keep hearing that one in six

women of childbearing age are at risk of high levels of mercury, and I wonder if I'm one of them," she said.

Industry groups say the EPA proposal would provide them with more flexibility. A cap-and-trade program "could cost the industry and the rate-payers significantly less money over time," said Dan Riedinger, a spokesman for the Edison Electric Institute.

Riedinger, who did not attend the field hearing, said mercury emissions from U.S. utilities represent just 1 percent of the global pool of mercury, so even large reductions are not likely to make states' fish consumption advisories go away.

"About 50 percent of all mercury emissions globally come from Asia alone, so unless there is a crackdown not just in the U.S. but elsewhere, it is unlikely that we will in the U.S. benefit from any appreciable improvement in the public exposure to mercury," he said. "Even a 50 percent reduction in U.S. utility emissions would on average reduce an individual's exposure in the U.S. by less than 1 percent."

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Bangor Daily News

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Rep. Allen holds hearing on mercury pollution

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUGUSTA — When the Environmental Protection Agency decided not to schedule a public hearing on a proposal to delay implementing new mercury pollution rules, U.S. Rep. Tom Allen decided to hold his own hearing in Maine.

The Clinton administration said coal-fired power plants would have to reduce mercury emissions by as much as 90 percent by the end of 2007. But the EPA now is considering easing those standards, requiring a 29 percent reduction by 2010, and a 69 percent reduction by 2018. It also would allow a "cap and trade" program that would let power plants trade pollution credits.

Allen called the proposal "embarrassing."

He said a recent EPA analysis found that 630,000 children with blood mercury levels higher than

5.8 parts per million are born in the United States each year.

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Medical and environmental experts spoke at Monday's hearing. Allen said he would turn their testimony over to the EPA.

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Perils of mercury detailed

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Blethen Maine Newspapers

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The Times Record

3/02/04

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