

Wisconsin Environment: EPA decision to undercut mercury pollution standards puts our health at risk

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MADISON — After months of protest, even from members of the industries the federal Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) keep in check, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) finalized an action that defangs these regulations.

The EPA unveiled MATS in late 2011 to limit emission of mercury and other toxics from power plants that use fossil fuels. Most utilities across the United States have complied with the regulations in the ensuing 8+ years.

A vast body of science recognizes that air toxics from coal plants can cause or contribute to neurological damage in developing fetuses, chronic respiratory diseases, various cancers, and other severe harm to human health and ecosystems. In 2017, air toxics emissions from coal- and oil-fired power plants were 96 percent lower than before MATS took effect, leading to an enormous reduction in public exposure to these harmful pollutants. The health benefits of the standards are enormous: they prevent up to 11,000 deaths, along with 130,000 asthma attacks among children, and 4,700 heart attacks every year.

In response, Wisconsin Environment State Director Megan Severson and WISPIRG Director Peter Skopec issued the following statements:

“In a desperate and futile bid to ‘bring coal back,’ EPA’s decision will bring us back to the days when mercury from power plants contaminated Wisconsin’s rivers, lakes, and streams,” said Severson. “This reckless decision poisons our water and air and puts Wisconsinites’ health at risk. At a time when we’re fighting a pandemic,

I can't think of anything more illogical.”

“Mercury’s toxic effects are not in question. The EPA’s own website acknowledges that it is a powerful neurotoxin that can impair children’s brain development,” said Skopec. “The EPA’s decision to attack the mercury standards in spite of this, and despite opposition from both parties, as well as industry, is absurd.”