

The Stump

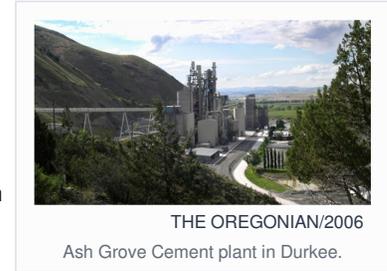
Mercury and the DEQ: trading our health for economic gain

Posted by Daniel J. Rohlf, guest opinion September 04, 2009 09:00AM

Picture yourself standing on the mossy banks of a clear Cascade stream far from civilization, a fishing pole in your hand. Pulling a wriggling fish onto the bank would be the highlight of a lazy summer day and provide a tasty dinner over the campfire.

It might also kill you.

A study released by the U.S. Geological Survey on Aug. 19 found mercury contamination in fish living in every one of the 291 streams it sampled across the country. Mercury is a neurotoxin poisonous to both humans and other animals. About a quarter of the fish the USGS sampled had mercury levels that made them too dangerous for humans to eat.



But people commonly eat the fish they catch, and those who eat more fish than the statistical average -- such as Native Americans and individuals from various ethnic groups for whom subsistence fishing is common -- are at far greater risk.

Most mercury contamination literally falls from the sky after it goes up into the atmosphere as pollution from a factory or power plant smokestack. As a result, even wilderness lakes and streams can have high levels of the toxin.

The biggest mercury polluter in the entire United States is a cement factory in eastern Oregon. This fact has not escaped notice of the state's environmental watchdog, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The very day the federal government released its disturbing report on mercury's widespread threat, DEQ officials announced that the agency would work hard to make sure that the cement company could continue to release mercury at a level 60 times greater than new federal emissions limits.

Huh?

While it may be hard to believe, the agency that describes its job as "to protect the quality of Oregon's environment" has decided that the cold cash from one cement plant should trump pollution caps set by the federal government to protect humans and wildlife across the country.

But even in a deep recession, DEQ should not be willing to trade off clear threats to health and safety for economic benefit.

Mercury exposure can prevent normal brain development, so it is especially dangerous to pregnant women and children. DEQ's air quality manager for eastern Oregon was quoted as saying that "every Oregonian supports industry," but it's a safe bet they support their kids more.

And protecting kids from environmental hazards such as mercury poisoning is supposed to be DEQ's mission.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski has the final say on whether to seek an exemption from the new federal limits on mercury pollution for the cement plant. And this one is an easy call: The governor should overrule DEQ. If he doesn't, the federal Environmental Protection Agency should say "no" to special treatment for the country's worst mercury polluter.

On its Web site, DEQ touts its "40 years of leading environmental change in Oregon." Unfortunately, the agency is leading efforts to change federal mercury regulations in a way that will leave the environment in much worse shape and put people's health at risk in Oregon and beyond.

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