

NATIONAL VOICES

Let them not eat tuna fish

By RENA STEINZOR

Two recent decisions on the environment by the industry-friendly Bush administration are combining to make mercury a serious threat to the health and safety of many of the nation's waterways. A few weeks ago, the administration unveiled its "Clear Skies" initiative, which establishes a complex credit-swapping scheme by which power plants will be entitled to emit mercury pollution into the air.

Then, on Jan. 13, the EPA released water quality trading guidelines that sanction "pilot projects" to ease limits on sewage treatment plants that dump mercury into the nation's coastal waters, lakes and rivers. Since mercury is a known poison, one might expect the administration to be working to reduce emissions as low as possible, but not, apparently, if doing so might cut into corporate profits.

Once mercury is deposited in water, fish absorb it. When humans eat the fish, their bodies take in the poison. At even very low levels, mercury poisoning in pregnant women damages their babies' central nervous system and causes heart, kidney and brain damage. Yet pregnant women are not the only ones at risk. After a yearlong study, a San Francisco physician announced in November 2002 that she had found symptoms of low-level mercury poisoning in dozens of her patients who consumed typical amounts of fish. Symptoms included hair loss, fatigue, depression, difficulty concentrating and headaches.

In addition, the families of low-income, subsistence fishermen, who rely on daily catch for the protein portion of their diet, are at even greater risk. In 2001, 44 states issued public-health warnings that people should not eat mercury-contaminated fish from local waters. The Great Lakes, the Florida Everglades, and portions of the Chesapeake Bay are afflicted, along with

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hundreds of other lesser-known water bodies. Provoked by the very severe problems in the Great Lakes, a broad coalition of sportsmen, wildlife groups and environmentalists has urged EPA to work toward a phase-out of all mercury pollution.

In nine states, fish advisories for mercury extend from inland lakes to coastal waters where tuna and other popular fish are caught. Tuna is the most consumed fish in the country, but because of concerns about mercury, many experts recommend that pregnant women limit themselves to two small cans per week.

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So, what is the Bush administration doing? A favor to power plants, that's what. Most of the mercury that ends up in the water is released first into the air, from smokestacks where large utilities burn coal. The heavy metal particles in the smoke fall

into the water. The president's "Clear Skies" initiative, supposedly crafted to clean up the air more cheaply, would permit power plants to create "hot spots" with vastly more mercury than the environment can sustain.

Here is how these schemes work. For 30 years, the standard approach has been to force plants to put scrubbers on their stacks so that the worst pollution will be removed before it goes into the air. But the Bush administration has decided that this straightforward solution is too costly for the utility industry. Instead, the EPA will give power plants "credits" authorizing mercury discharges of specific amounts. The plants will then be free to trade unused credits with plants up or downwind, even if mercury emissions land where fish are spawned. Now, sewage treatment plants in especially contaminated areas would also get to swap mercury discharges among themselves, without regard to the amount of mercury already in the water.

The Bush administration argues that some power plants can get rid of mercury more cheaply than others. So by allowing companies to trade mercury credits, we cut pollution more efficiently. Never mind that, under this plan, mercury emissions may well be cut by utilities in Southwestern deserts while the Great Lakes, the Everglades and the Chesapeake Bay become more polluted.

All other things being equal, it is fine to save industry money. But when big companies get a windfall at the expense of unsuspecting consumers, and when the cost to the public is fouled water and poisonous fish, it's a false economy.

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