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Federal Agency Threatens to Dump Toxic Mercury Stockpile on Open Market; Experts Warn Potent Toxin Would Boomerang Back to U.S. Dinner Plates

Sen. Obama, Health Advocates Urge Energy Department to Keep Mercury in Domestic Storage, Safely Away from Global Chemical Bazaar

WASHINGTON (November 16, 2006) – The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) is considering selling some 1,300 tons of surplus mercury on the international market, prompting urgent warnings from health organizations that the toxic metal would easily find its way back into the domestic food chain from the developing world where it's typically used today.

Word of the possible sale also sparked a formal request by Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) to the agency to keep the mercury safely in storage and out of the environment.

The senator was joined by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Mercury Policy Project in warning that U.S. mercury exports will “boomerang” back to the United States. Mercury exports often go to poorly regulated industries in developing countries, which release it into the atmosphere. Some of that air pollution wafts over the ocean and back to the United States, contaminating ocean and freshwater fish.

“There is no question that mercury from this sale would find its way up the food chain, onto our plates, and into our bodies,” said Dr. Linda Greer, an environmental toxicologist and director of NRDC's Environmental Health Program. “Inviting less developed countries to a close-out sale on surplus American poison is sheer lunacy given what we know about how easily mercury moves around the globe.”

Prenatal and infant mercury exposure can cause mental retardation, cerebral palsy, deafness and blindness. Even in low doses, mercury may affect a child's development, delaying walking and talking, shortening attention span and causing learning disabilities. In adults, it can adversely affect fertility and blood pressure, and cause memory loss, tremors, vision loss and other problems. Growing evidence suggests exposure to mercury may also lead to heart disease.

The DOE stockpile is more than eight times the amount exported in 2004 by all U.S. companies combined. Once used in weapons and other energy-related technologies, the mercury is now obsolete for DOE functions and no longer of any use to the government.

In a letter this week to DOE Secretary Samuel Bodman, Sen. Obama strongly urged DOE to continue to secure its mercury stockpiles in long-term storage. “Given that mercury is a trans-boundary pollutant that is deposited both locally and globally,” he wrote, “any strategy to reduce mercury in the environment must also include reducing the volume of mercury traded and sold in the world market.” (For a copy of the letter, go to www.nrdc.org/media/docs/061116.pdf.)

Currently, most of the DOE's surplus mercury is stored at the Y-12 National Nuclear Security Administration site in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

NRDC and the Mercury Policy Project urged DOE to follow the lead of the Department of Defense (DOD), which, after a thorough review, opted to store rather than sell its nearly 5,000 tons of surplus mercury. The two organizations also support a bill introduced this summer by Sen. Obama that would ban U.S. mercury exports by 2012.

“We’ve got to stop the cycle of toxic mercury trade that winds up contaminating the fish we eat,” said Dr. Greer.

Mercury also poses a substantial direct health risk to workers around the world, said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. “As many as 15 million gold miners in more than 40 countries, for example, are at risk from high-concentration mercury vapors and mercury intoxication, which can lead to severe nervous system poisoning,” he said. “The U.S. government has a moral obligation to restrict its exports to developing countries, as the European Union recently proposed to do by 2011.

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The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, non-profit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1.2 million members and online activists nationwide served from offices in New York, Washington, Santa Monica and San Francisco. More information about NRDC is available through its Web site: www.nrdc.org.

The Mercury Policy Project is co-founder of the Zero Mercury Working Group (a coalition of 28 public interest NGOs from around the world) and works to promote policies and programs to indefinitely store surplus mercury and reduce/eliminate anthropogenic mercury uses and releases; trade in mercury; and human, ecological and wildlife exposures to mercury. More information is available at MPP’s Web site, www.mercurypolicy.org or www.zeromercury.org.