

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“An Oversight Hearing on the Administration's Mercury Emissions Proposal”

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, good morning, my name is Scott Sparlin and I am the President of the New Ulm Area Sport Fisherman, a volunteer group of sport fishermen that was started 19 years ago. I am pleased to have this opportunity to offer testimony on the impacts of mercury contamination in Minnesota and the Bush Administration's mercury emissions proposal.

Last week, our organization joined nearly 500 other sportsmen groups from around the country on a letter to the Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Leavitt urging him to fix his current plan to control mercury from power plants. Sportsmen are speaking publicly about the mercury problem because we are personally seeing the effects of it, on our families, our livelihoods, and our heritage.

Mercury contamination in Minnesota has become so common that all rivers and 14,000 lakes have health warnings urging citizens to seriously limit or avoid fish consumption completely. The effects of these warnings go far beyond the angling public.

In Minnesota, close to half of all residents possess a fishing license. For us it is part of our assumed heritage. Until recent years, we have regarded eating fish we catch as an individual right with no conditions other than a respect towards the water and the possession of a fishing license. My great grandfather ate the fish he caught having no health concerns, as did my grandfather and my father. But when it comes to fishing in Minnesota, times have changed. I can no longer, without worry, bring home the fish I catch and feed them to my family. Our children, who are proudly learning how to fish, are not able to eat a lot of what they catch. Why must I and all the families of this generation, as well as those yet to come, have this as our legacy? Citizens in Minnesota feel let down because our nation's policies have allowed this to happen.

The concern among citizens in our region is extremely high. In Minnesota, 1.6 million people go fishing every year, contributing about \$1.3 billion to our state economy. The health of our huge recreation industry and all the businesses that depend on this industry are at risk when the state's lakes and streams are filled with fish that are contaminated with mercury.

Ask any fisherman, and he'll tell you that he likes to be able to eat what he catches, and when he can't, fishing is less fun. Today, many anglers are nervous, causing them to practice only catch and release of fish. Other anglers are simply not going fishing, or not

as much as they used to. They have less desire to go fishing knowing that their catch is tainted and potentially harmful. These views are not held only by anglers in Minnesota. They spread to those who visit our state, affecting our tourism which depends a lot on good fishing. But let me be clear. Not fishing is not the answer here. It's making sure our fish are clean and safe.

In addition to having lots of anglers who go fishing as a favorite past time or hobby, Minnesota is also home to large populations of different ethnic and low-income groups. Many of these residents do not fish recreationally. A large portion of their diet consists of fish caught from our waters. For low-income residents, locally caught fish may be all they have to eat. Regular exposure to mercury puts these segments of the population at an even higher risk than sportsmen.

The New Ulm Area Sport Fishermen have been engaged in an education and awareness initiative to rally support for the reduction of mercury in our natural resources. We've hosted a mercury summit to help sportsmen groups better understand the mercury problem and what's being done about it.

Much concern and many questions have been raised about the ability of coal fire power plants to reduce emissions of mercury. There is a sense of disappointment at the unwillingness of the EPA to set strict limits on all mercury being released into the atmosphere, especially the mercury coming from the coal power industry. Maybe weak pollution standards could be justified if the technology to clean it up isn't available or is much too expensive. But neither is an issue in this case. The technology is available at a relatively reasonable cost. What's missing is a federal requirement to push these companies to invest in this new technology. Given the seriousness of the associated health risks, the federal government should be doing all it can to eliminate mercury emissions from power companies in the shortest amount of time.

The assurance of clean water is an essential service to be provided, protected, and guaranteed by our federal government. It is not a luxury item that we hope to have someday in the distant future. We all depend on clean water. If the water is clean, so too are the fish that swim in it. If the fish are free of pollution, we can feel better about the health of our children who consume the fish. Clean water should not be left to the mercy of a few powerful decision makers. To continue allowing mercury to contaminate our water is an abandonment of government responsibility to all citizens.

Please make sure that the EPA does all it can to clean up mercury from power plants before the end of the decade. Our children depend on it, our national heritage depends on it.

I thank you for convening a hearing on this critical issue and for the opportunity to provide testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.