



Not for Sale

NRDC spearheads the removal of hundreds of tons of toxic mercury from unsafe global trade


Five years ago, NRDC's health team launched an ambitious international campaign to reduce global mercury pollution. In 2008, our hard work paid off with the passage of federal legislation that prohibits the sale of this toxic metal into global commerce. Combined with a similar policy we helped pass in the European Union, this major victory will remove one-third of the world's toxic mercury supply from circulation.

This landmark victory is a shining example of NRDC's unique ability to apply science, law, and advocacy to tackle a seemingly insurmountable problem of global scale. First, NRDC's experts systematically identified the most significant sources of mercury pollution in the world. We discovered that although the best-known source was emissions from coal-fired power plants, equally important was commodity-grade mercury used in industry. We also learned that a flood of surplus mercury being taken out of commission in developed countries was being "recycled" through export to developing nations, where it was being used in polluting ways. Most commonly, this exported mercury is used for artisanal gold mining,

an industry involving an estimated 15 million people in developing nations, including 4.5 million women and 1 million children.

When it makes its way into certain types of water bodies, elemental mercury converts to methylmercury, which is highly toxic and has a tendency to accumulate in fish—and the people who eat those fish. Harmful even at low levels of exposure, methylmercury interferes with the functioning of the brain and nervous system, vision, motor skills, blood pressure, fertility, and more. At particular risk are young children with developing nervous systems and pregnant mothers, who can transmit mercury to their unborn children, increasing the chances of miscarriage and birth defects.

Even when mishandled in distant countries, mercury presents a serious American health concern. Scientists estimate that up to one-third of U.S. mercury air pollution travels to the United States from Asia, some of which is the result of extensive artisanal mining.



"Not the air we breathe, not the fish we eat, and not the mercury pollution that can contaminate both, recognize federal boundaries. This is why the passage of the legislation that bans the U.S. export of mercury is a great victory for Americans' health and the health of people in the developing world. It will curb the flow of mercury into global commerce, keeping it out of the world's air and water."

Susan Keane, NRDC mercury policy analyst

With a robust analysis of the problem in hand, NRDC's team carefully crafted a multi-year, multi-pronged strategy that would make a lasting imprint on the problem's scale and scope. We worked with partners from both developed and developing nations to negotiate coordinated global reductions with the United Nations Environmental Program. We formed key partnerships overseas with international organizations. And we drafted U.S. legislation to curb our domestic contribution to global mercury pollution.

Signed into law in October 2008, the Mercury Minimization Act combats a large source of mercury pollution worldwide, namely, the export of elemental mercury from the United States to developing countries, where it is not closely regulated. By requiring that all mercury in the United States remain here, where it can be managed according to U.S. laws and safely stored long-term if not used by U.S. industries, the law will result in the protection of countless people here and abroad and a safer, cleaner environment.

To help pass this landmark legislation, introduced in the Senate by now-President Barack Obama and Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, NRDC worked closely with members of Congress, state officials, and representatives of industry, including the American Chemistry Council and the National Mining Association. When we needed to step up the pressure in Washington to keep this issue top-of-mind, board member and Founding Director John H. Adams and members of NRDC's Los Angeles Council were relentless with calls to key senators and representatives. The moment of victory arrived on October 14, when the White House called NRDC's Legislative Director, Karen Wayland, to say that President Bush had signed the bill into law.

At roughly the same time NRDC helped pass the U.S. mercury export ban, our partner in Europe, the European Environmental Bureau, helped pass a similar export ban across the European Union. Together, these laws will reduce the amount of mercury in global trade by about one-third, substantially decreasing supply and increasing the price, which should in turn motivate industries worldwide to substitute less toxic alternatives. Both laws are proof that companies, environmental groups, and people of all political stripes can come together to make common sense policy for the common good.

Tackling Mercury Pollution in Your Neighborhood, Too

NRDC is not only working on the international front to combat mercury pollution, but we are also advocating for state and local bans on products that contain harmful mercury, such as some types of thermometers and switches. NRDC-led partnerships with state-based action groups are moving state legislation across America. This year we had victories in Illinois, New Hampshire, and Minnesota, bringing the total number of states to pass comprehensive legislation that bans the use of mercury in products to 11—covering 30 percent of the U.S. population. Several bills are pending in more Great Lakes states, which, if passed, will mean that 40 percent of the U.S. population will be protected. This sets the stage for our ultimate goal: persuading manufacturers of these products to discontinue the sale of mercury-based products nationwide.

Attorney **Kate Sinding** helped pass a New York law that regulates mercury in "e-waste" such as discarded televisions.



Left: Legislative Director **Karen Wayland** used her political know-how on both sides of the aisle to move mercury legislation through the Senate.

Right: NRDC Trustee **Anna Scott Carter** works to protect our health from globally polluting industries.

