

Support a Ban On U.S. Mercury Exports

The United States should take strong measures against global mercury contamination by adopting a ban on the export of surplus mercury to the world market. The U.S. Department of Defense recognized the dangers of mercury to health and the environment when it voluntarily took its own excess mercury supply off of the market and placed it into long-term storage. The Department of Energy, another U.S. agency with large mercury reserves, has recently adopted a similar policy. The U.S. government must also ban the export of surplus mercury from private industrial uses of mercury as they are phased out.

Health and environmental dangers of mercury

Mercury is a notorious neurotoxic chemical that poses particular harm to developing fetuses and young children. It is never broken down in the environment—instead, it accumulates in our air, water, and food supply, becoming more concentrated as it moves up the food chain.

Consumption of mercury-contaminated fish places billions of people worldwide, especially women of childbearing age and children, at risk of mercury poisoning. The U.S. EPA has estimated that 8 percent of women have unsafe levels of mercury in their bloodstream.

And mercury is a global pollutant, which means that it travels around the world from wherever it is emitted. Highly polluting factories in countries such as India contaminate U.S. lakes and rivers and our coastal zones as well as isolated environments such as the Arctic with this global pollutant.

Sources of global mercury pollution

In the United States, many people associate mercury with emissions from coal-fired power plants. However, mercury is also a commodity metal for many products and industrial processes. Unfortunately, these uses result in pollution that threatens our health and environment.

Recognizing the dangers of mercury, the United States and the European Union (EU) have taken steps within their respective borders to limit or to phase out mercury's uses in industry and commerce, and to substitute it with safer alternatives.

An unfortunate result of these progressive policies is a glut of surplus mercury in the global market from the industrialized world. This mercury is bought cheaply by many developing countries, where it is often misused, creating dangerous pollution that travels around the globe and ends up right back in U.S. air, soil, water, and fish.

A solution to curb mercury pollution in the United States—and the world

The single most important step for the developed world is to place its surplus mercury into safe storage in order to limit the trade of mercury on the global market. The EU has already adopted a ban on the export of the surplus mercury. This measure is crucial, because the EU is actively phasing out major uses of mercury over the next 5 to 10 years, leaving European industry with a very large store of surplus material.

As the fourth largest exporter of mercury in the world, the United States can make a meaningful global impact on mercury pollution by enacting a similar export ban. The only long-term solution to the global mercury problem is to reduce global supply and demand for the toxic metal. We must take mercury completely out of commerce and place it in safe, long-term storage and disposal repositories where it will not threaten human health or the environment anywhere in the world.

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