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Northeast pushes to cut mercury

95 percent reduction may depend on rest of nation

By Robert Miller, Staff Writer
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The Northeast states have a plan to reduce mercury in the air. But the plan is also a challenge to the rest of the country -- and the world -- to do likewise.

"We're in a bind," Lee Dunbar, assistant director of standards and planning for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said Friday. "We're told to write a plan for the New England region. But it's inefficient for us to write a plan for something we can't control."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 1 office in Boston released its plan to reduce atmospheric mercury on Thursday. In effect, it recognizes that the New England states and New York are well on their way to reaching their first goal-- reducing mercury in the environment by 75 percent from 1998 to 2010.

But the plan also acknowledges that to reach the EPA's final goal -- a 98 percent reduction of mercury from 1998 -- will take a much longer time. That's because **the main sources of mercury that now plague the region aren't from the Northeast. They're from the huge coal-burning power plants in the Midwest and Southeast.**

"Beyond 2010, that depends on what they do in the rest of the country," said Stephen Perkins, **director of the office of ecosystems for EPA Region 1.** "Then, there's still global transport of mercury. Once mercury gets into the atmosphere, it can travel incredibly long distances. They've found mercury on the West Coast they've traced to Asia."

Although the issue at hand is atmospheric mercury -- mercury vapors that are part of air pollution -- the EPA regulates mercury under the Clean Water Act. That's because when mercury eventually drifts downward, it ends up in the water. Then, it becomes methyl mercury, which accumulates in the food chain and ends up in fish and humans.

Methyl mercury is a neurotoxin and affects the ways nerves function. It seems especially dangerous to developing fetuses, infants and small children, who can suffer decreased IQ, loss of language skills and loss of memory function if exposed to methyl mercury.

Currently, all freshwater fish in the state except trout have enough mercury in them to merit an advisory from the state Department of Public Health.

That advisory tells pregnant women, nursing mothers and children under the age of 6 to eat no more than one meal of freshwater fish per month. The rest of the population, the health department said, should limit itself to one such meal a week.

The Northeast states -- along with Quebec and the Maritime Provinces of Canada -- have taken concrete steps to get rid of mercury in the environment -- limiting mercury emissions from smoke stacks and getting dentists to control the mercury they use to make fillings.

"If someone drops a thermometer in a school and spills mercury, we're there with the men in the white coats," the DEP's Dunbar said. "We're there like gangbusters."

"It's a reality that the Northeast region has done just about all it can," said Michael Bender of the Mercury Policy Program, which has its offices in Montpelier, Vt. "The changes that will have to be made are outside the region."

But Bender said the federal EPA has dragged its feet on imposing any national standards that could reduce mercury emissions from the big coal-fired power plants because it will cost those plants money to cut their mercury pollution.

"The EPA has regulations, but they won't really bring any change until 2018," Bender said.

Bender acknowledged that pollution overseas is a problem as well.

"I was in China two weeks ago and the air pollution there is horrendous," he said. "But the situation is the same as in the United States. We can't say, on one hand, that there is a problem, but on the other hand, we don't want to do anything about it."

Dunbar acknowledged that mercury can be hard to capture in the pollution escaping from power plants.

"It's a vapor," he said. "You can't just get it out with filters. But the technology exists that can do the work."

Dunbar said the Northeast states are proof that individually and collectively, states can cut levels of a dangerous pollutant. But to take it to the next level, other states have to do the same kind of pollution reduction.

"We don't feel they go far enough," he said.