

TESTIMONY OF DR. JIM MAIER REGARDING AIRBORNE MERCURY
POLLUTION AT A HEARING CONVENED BY REP. TOM ALLEN 3/1/04

Thank you Representative Allen and others for this chance for M^{ai}ners to speak out on this issue!

I'm Dr. Jim Maier, a child and family psychiatrist with over 25 years experience living and working in Maine. I'm also the father of two daughters of child bearing age. And since I've spent most of my professional career helping to take care of the behavioral and neurological problems of kids who, for whatever combination of reasons including fetal brain damage, have been handicapped in school and in life, this is not just an academic issue for me.

The glaring fact that this is a "Shadow" hearing in the absence of EPA speaks volumes about the moral cowardice and irresponsibility of this administration. The Feds know a lot about the toxicity of mercury emissions of coal-fired plants in the Midwest for New Englanders and others "at the end of the tailpipe," but seem not to care what we think. It's a lot like a Bishop who has learned there's a bad priest in his Diocese sending that individual out of state to some other parish, and just not wanting to hear how many more children have been abused and harmed in the new location.

We know mercury is a bad actor. We've taken many measures here in Maine to clean up our own state. Like 45 other states, we're warning people not to eat much fish. (The administration does deserve credit for promoting "catch and release," but only because it's allowing the fish to become progressively more toxic to mothers of childbearing age!) But to delay implementation of the existing technology to reduce mercury emissions by 90% by 2008, and allowing another decade of relaxed standards in return for fat campaign contributions from the polluters, is a devil's bargain Mainer's don't accept. This proposed delay, or meaningless shell games allowing some plants to continue to pollute if others clean up, means that perhaps 5% or more of women of childbearing age will continue to have unsafe levels of mercury in their bodies, and be putting tens of thousands of their babies at risk of damage to their developing brains or cardiovascular systems. (A long term study sponsored by Dr. Philippe Grandjean of the Harvard School of Public Health in the Faroe Islands has published objective evidence about this in the Journal of Pediatrics.)

Again to use the sex offender analogy, it's as if we are registering all sex offenders and pedophile priests in Maine, notifying neighborhoods and churches about the risks of letting them be in our communities, but then permitting any other states to send convicted child molesters here, and turning a blind eye to what damage and trauma these out-of-state sex criminals may inflict on Maine children.

Like all other medical students, I learned the name Minimata early in my training. Like Chernobyl, Bhopal, and Love Canal—other names that live in environmental infamy-- it was the site of an environmental tragedy that taught just how poisonous high dose mercury can be. Death, blindness, cerebral palsy, severe mental retardation, seizures and other severe symptoms occurred in the exposed population around Minimata Bay, Japan where an industrial spill occurred. But we also know that subtle but definite brain and central nervous system effects can happen with exposure to far lower doses that come from eating even moderate amounts of fish contaminated by methyl mercury, an easily

absorbed compound that is spread through the body, across the placenta, and is secreted in breast milk. This is insidious, because mothers may not even be symptomatic with levels of mercury that can definitely affect their more vulnerable fetus. Higher mercury exposure on the developing brain has been correlated with decreased attention, fine motor impairment, problems with language and visual-spatial abilities, and memory impairments. It's hard to pin down just what role mercury plays in such impairments because the research is less well developed than with lead, another known bad actor. But as with lead poisoning, as more research is done, we will probably become more concerned, and may be lowering what we think of as "acceptable" exposure levels. What's an acceptable level to a loon? The EPA heard testimony from the Natural Resources Council of Maine at a recent hearing in Philadelphia that loons in Maine test 4X higher with respect to mercury levels than loons in Oregon. What levels are o.k. for Bald Eagles, whose reproductive success may be jeopardized by the mercury they concentrate in their bodies. Unfortunately they don't vote, but we'll be voting on their behalf in November!

Perhaps if the Bush administration cared to reduce their blatant hypocrisy about "No Child Left Behind," they should just come out and speak plainly about "No Child Left Unexposed to Toxics."

Representative Allen, we hope that you will pass on to your colleagues in the Maine Delegation who also care about clean air and water, and to the EPA which apparently doesn't care nearly enough, the angry earful you're hearing today from Maine people!

Respectfully Submitted,



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