

THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



New Limits on Power Plant Toxic Emissions

This December, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it's finally moving ahead with regulations to limit the release of toxics like mercury, arsenic, and cyanide from coal- and oil-fired power plants.

This action was actually mandated by Congress 22 years ago, as part of the Clean Air Act. Since then, public health advocates have been working hard to get the EPA to institute the needed rules. So it's about time!

EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson presented the news at the Washington D.C. Children's Hospital, saying that the new Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) will "protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution."

The EPA estimates that MATS will prevent about 11,000 premature deaths annually, 4,700 heart attacks, 130,000 cases of aggravated childhood asthma, and 6,300 cases of acute bronchitis among children. This is expected to save Americans \$90 billion in health care costs, far outweighing the anticipated costs of compliance. Chronic illnesses such as asthma and heart problems consume about three-quarters of U.S. health care expenditures and cost us over \$1.3 trillion annually.

There are currently no national limits on the toxic air pollution released from power plants, says Frances Beinecke,



president of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), even though every other major industrial sector in America is subject to toxic emission standards. MATS will be implemented over the next three to four years, and is expected to trim 90% of the mercury emissions from coal burned in power plants, 88% of acid gas, and 41% of sulfur dioxide. Also, upgrading the pollution control equipment is expected to create 55,000 short- and long-term jobs.

The NRDC's John Walker says, "This is a generational achievement, that marks America cleaning up dirty power plants once and for all." Eric Lerner of Health Care Without Harm comments, "Power plants are notorious polluters.... This new standard is a major step toward protecting the environment and public health." The *New York Times* calls MATS "a long overdue measure for cleaner air and a healthier America."

Citizens have played a key role in this outcome, submitting over 900,000 comments (the most ever for an EPA rule), and voicing overwhelming support for the regulations. This demonstrates how vital it is for us to take community-level action to protect our shared well-being.

Unfortunately, some power companies have been trying to block these rules using untrue scare tactics. (See *The New York Times* article referenced at right for more on this.) So we need to remain watchful to ensure that forward movement continues.



It's Our Birthday!!

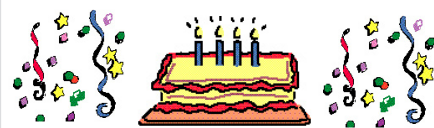
With this issue, we're celebrating 11 years of publishing *The Next STEP (TNS)*!

The goal of this innovative City project is to nurture a healthier Sebastopol for everyone by reducing our exposure to toxics.

Thus we encourage voluntary reductions in the use of toxics in all areas of our lives — including our homes, schools, businesses, parks, food, and environment.

TNS is produced by a small team of local citizens, working on a volunteer basis (which keeps costs very low) because we support this goal. We're grateful to the City Council and staff for acting in the community's best interest with this project.

Please fill out the enclosed survey card to give us your feedback about our efforts. Also let us know how we can best support your toxics reduction in the upcoming year, including any questions, tips, story ideas, or success stories. Your support is what makes this project possible. Thank you!



In discussing MATS, the EPA's Jackson mentioned her two sons' struggles with asthma, adding that, "Families across the country — including my own — will benefit from the simple fact of being able to breathe cleaner air. That is what environmental protection and the work of the EPA is all about."

SOURCES: "Toward Healthier Air," The New York Times, December 21, 2011 www.nytimes.com/2011/12/22/opinion/toward-healthier-air.html • EPA MATS page, which includes information on its benefits by state www.epa.gov/airquality/powerplanttoxics

What's the Problem with Mercury?

Almost all Americans have at least trace amounts of mercury in their bodies, because it's so widespread in our environment, largely from coal plant emissions. This persistent material bioaccumulates up the food chain, reaching significant amounts in our fish and seafood. One-third of U.S. lakes and a quarter of rivers and streams are so polluted with mercury that people are warned to avoid eating fish from them, especially pregnant women and children.

Mercury is known to harm neurological functioning and development, including cognitive thinking, memory, attention, language, and fine motor and visual spatial skills. Children and developing fetuses are especially vulnerable to mercury.

Other exposure symptoms include tremors, headaches, insomnia, mood swings, and impaired speech, vision, hearing, and coordination. Higher doses can cause kidney damage, respiratory failure, and death.

SOURCES: Health Effects, Mercury, US EPA www.epa.gov/hg/effects.htm • Mercury Contamination in Fish, www.nrdc.org/health/effects/mercury/sources.asp

Removing Toxic Lead from Gasoline: A Success Story

Even as we take on current challenges, it's vital that we also celebrate past successes. For instance, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) recently reported that, because of decades of work by many people and organizations around the world, toxic lead has been removed from gasoline in over 175 countries, "representing near-global eradication."

A new independent scientific analysis indicates that this has resulted in a 90% drop in blood lead levels worldwide, 1.2 million saved lives each year, and \$2.4 trillion in health, social, and economic benefits annually. The NRDC notes that "America has saved more than \$10 for every \$1 invested in the

phase-out — from reduced health costs to better, more efficient fuel."

Lead exposure causes brain, kidney, and cardiovascular harm. Even small amounts can lower a child's IQ level and shorten attention span. It's also associated with aggressive, violent, and delinquent behavior.

The NRDC says, "Getting the lead out of gasoline is a powerful reminder of what we can achieve when we set politics aside and work toward a common goal of protecting the health of children and families."

SOURCE: "Global Phase-out of Lead in Gasoline Succeeds: Major Victory for Kids' Health," Oct. 27, 2011, Peter Lehner, Executive Director of NRDC, www.switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/plehner/global_phase-out_of_lead_in_ga.html

What Pesticides Are in My Food?

So you've heard that mainstream (non-organic) food contains pesticides. But how common is that?

You can see for yourself with Pesticide Action Network's online database, www.whatsonmyfood.org. Just click on your favorite foods to see what toxics were found in official USDA testing. It's really quite stunning to see that everyday items such as apples, bananas, orange juice, and butter regularly contain multiple pesticides that are known carcinogens, neurotoxins, developmental toxics, and hormone disrupters. These toxics generally don't wash off produce, and can stay in our bodies for years. Of course, they're in processed foods as well!

So we can largely avoid toxics by buying organic. But what foods are most important to buy organic?

For help with this question, see the Environmental Working Group's handy "Dirty Dozen" list of the most pesticide-contaminated produce, as well as their "Clean 15" list of the least-contaminated. Their data comes from USDA and FDA testing. www.ewg.org/foodnews/summary

At a deeper level, this information reveals that we are indeed being regularly poisoned through our food, without our prior informed consent or sufficient controls. Is that what we really want?

Timely Tips

By reducing your toxic use and exposure, you can nurture both your own well-being and a healthier world. These handy resources can help you find less-toxic approaches!

■ **The TNS Online Index** makes it easy for you to look up our past articles on toxics and alternatives.

Some topics of timely interest include: Proper disposal of toxics, electronic waste, and prescription medicine; less-toxic control of ants, snails, weeds, and other pests; safer housecleaning; less-harmful pet care; the problems with specific pesticides such as Roundup; and the links between toxics and disease. www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html

■ **Learn what everyday items are toxic and where to discard them** at www.recyclenow.org or in the Yellow Pages Recycling Guide. Or call 565-3375.

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day** is March 13. Call 795-2025 to make an appointment, at least 24 hours in advance.

■ **My Ask EcoGirl column and Facebook page** have more news, information, and actions on toxics and other eco-issues. See www.AskEcoGirl.info and www.facebook.com/AskEcoGirl.

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol, implemented by local citizen volunteers. STEP's mission is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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