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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Mercury Scare
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If you've read a newspaper lately, chances are you've seen an ad claiming that millions of women who eat tuna and other fish with mercury are poisoning their children. That sure sounds bad. Only problem is, it's a whole lot abalone.

About the only thing the ads do prove is that trusting "environmentalists" in a political debate is harmful to your health and the national well being. Their fury this time is directed at Bush Administration plans to *reduce* mercury emissions from utilities 70% by 2018. They want the regulation to go even further -- never mind that the Clinton Administration did nothing to reduce emissions -- and their strategy is to scare pregnant women.

Friends of the Earth is running a national newspaper ad picturing cute kids with the subtle tag line, "They're being poisoned." The Sierra Club proclaims that five million women have "dangerous levels of mercury in their bodies," while the supposedly moderate Environmental Defense estimates "more than 600,000 newborns each year are put at risk of brain damage and learning disabilities." Also in on this horror show are the Natural Resources Defense Council and MoveOn.org, the George Soros political hedge fund.

This is all pretty low, even by green standards. But it gets worse when you consider that there's no evidence to suggest that cutting emissions will reduce mercury in fish. There's also no credible science showing America faces any health threat at all from current fish consumption.

Some 55% of all mercury emissions are *au naturel* -- from oceans, volcanoes and forest fires -- and another 42% are man-made outside of America. U.S. power plants produce just 1% of global mercury emissions. No surprise then that though U.S. mercury emissions have fallen significantly since 1970, studies have found no change in mercury levels in Pacific tuna. Even if the world got rid of every power plant, fish would still ingest naturally occurring mercury. Studies of 550-year-old Aleutian mummies show more mercury content than in people today.

Does this mercury hurt us? The gold standard in mercury research is a University of Rochester study that tracked a group of Seychelles Island children from birth to nine years old. While their mothers ate fish similar to that consumed in the U.S., they ate 10 times as much and had an average of six times as much mercury in their bodies. Yet researchers found no negative effects in their children.

The super-greens base their misinformation on a problematic study of Faroe Island children. The Faroe mothers also consumed enormous amounts of mercury, though from seafood (such as whale) most Americans don't eat. When their children were given 17 neuropsychological tests, some scored slightly below-average on three. Scientists have since disputed whether there was ever a statistical correlation and note that, even if there was, it's impossible to know it was caused by mercury (the mothers were consuming high levels of such other toxins as PCBs and DDT). Either way, the kids who scored marginally below peers on a few tests didn't remotely have "learning disabilities" or "brain damage."

Moreover, the U.S. mercury "safety" level (which the EPA unfortunately sets off the Faroe study) is one-tenth that of the smallest amount of mercury connected with a lower Faroe test score. A Food and Drug Administration official has pointed out that even women who are over the U.S. limit still have an eight-fold margin of safety. All this science is compiled neatly at the Center for Science and Public Policy (www.scienceandpolicy.org <<http://www.scienceandpolicy.org/>> 1).

Why then is the Bush Administration reducing mercury? It has no choice. The NRDC (now running hysterical ads) sued the Clinton EPA over mercury, but the agency refused to do anything until the day after Al Gore conceded the election in 2000. That's when it decided mercury should be regulated and tossed the problem to Mr. Bush. This has conveniently allowed former EPA head Carol Browner, who ignored mercury in her tenure, to howl over the Bush proposals.

The Bush plan is a sensible "cap and trade" reduction of the kind that worked for acid rain. If the White House has made a mistake, it is in not fighting back aggressively enough on the health dangers posed by this mercury scare. The greens are warning pregnant women away from fish that provide vitamins A, E and C, protein, and omega-3 fatty acids. Fish not only help reduce heart attacks and interfere with the progression of breast cancer, they contribute to infant eye and brain development.

The silver lining here may be that these environmentalist scares are becoming so routine and over-the-top that they are having less public impact. Americans are figuring out that green activists have abandoned any claim to scientific objectivity as they pursue political power. Ignore their claims, and enjoy your next tuna sandwich.

Letters to the Editor

Mercury Exposure Risks In Prenatal Development

15 April 2004

The Wall Street Journal

Your April 8 editorial “The Mercury Scare” claims that mercury contamination of seafood is a whole lot of abalone based on “a problematic study of Faroe Island children.” As the senior investigator of the Faroes study, I would like to provide a different perspective.

Contrary to your statements, the Faroes study was selected as the gold standard by the National Academy of Sciences, which concluded that a mercury exposure limit should be based on our data. Since then, expert committees under the auspices of the World Health Organization and the European Commission have concurred.

We documented that increased prenatal exposure to mercury is associated with deficits in several brain functions. A doubling of a child’s prenatal mercury exposure will cause a delay in development that corresponds to being about two months behind at age seven years. This delay may be translated to a loss of about 1.5 IQ points. Our results are in agreement with a large study from New Zealand and most other evidence. In contrast, your editorial chooses as its own gold standard a study from a developing country, where mercury effects were not detected.

The exposure limit used by EPA does not provide any large margin of safety, if at all. Our most recent data from the Faroes, published in The Journal of Pediatrics in February, show that adverse effects may occur at mercury exposures well below the EPA limit.

You provide as your source the Center for Science and Public Policy, part of the Frontiers for Freedom. Despite its claim to enlist the expertise of world-renowned scientists, this source provides only a unilateral view of the mercury risks.

Philippe Grandjean, M.D.
Harvard School of Public Health
Boston

An Alarming Statement On Mercury Contamination

20 April 2004

The Wall Street Journal

In response to an April 15 Letter to the Editor from Philippe Grandjean, M.D., defending the claims of the Faroes mercury contamination study, I would ask him to enlighten the rest of the scientific establishment.

At what point did our understanding of childhood development grow to the point that we could reasonably note a statistical difference of two months worth of development (or as Dr. Grandjean says, 1.5 IQ points)? Last time I checked, differences of this small a magnitude (especially in an area as nebulous as childhood development and IQ) are little more than background, and could be

caused by many, many factors, including simple chance. That's an alarming public statement to make on such a minimal level of evidence.

John B. Nevy
Philadelphia

Misuse of Mercury Study Could Cause Health Crisis

22 April 2004
The Wall Street Journal

Responding to comments from Philippe Grandjean about the Center for Science and Public Policy (April 15, Letters to the Editor <http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB108197939271182916,00.html?mod=article-outset-box>), we urge readers to examine and judge for themselves our richly referenced literature reviews on mercury (www.scienceandpolicy.org <http://www.scienceandpolicy.org/>).

Dr. Grandjean's Faroes study is a valuable contribution to the literature of exposure to multiple neurotoxin combinations such as methylmercury, DDT and PCBs ingested with the meat and fat of pilot whales. However, this study has been judged neither appropriate nor applicable for health response to single exposure to methylmercury from consumption of ocean fish.

As for claims of IQ loss, we take him at his word that he has never measured IQ in the Faroes cohort (www.masgc.org/mercury/abs-clapp.html <http://www.masgc.org/mercury/abs-clapp.html>).

It is troublesome that the Faroes study is being misused to create a potential health crisis in the U.S. by alarming people -- especially women, children and the elderly -- away from myriad nutritional benefits of fish consumption.

Robert Ferguson
Center for Science and Public Policy
Washington