



Fast Facts

In 2008, Georgia DNR issued fish consumption advisories due to mercury on 23 public lakes 500 acres or larger and 49 different creeks and rivers as well as one advisory for ocean waters.

In 2007, Georgia Power's Plant Scherer, located in Monroe County, emitted more than 1500 pounds of mercury, making it the 4th largest power plant mercury emitter in the country.

In 2003, Olin Corp's chlor-alkali plant released more than 700 pounds of mercury into the air, making it the third largest source of mercury emissions in Georgia.

If constructed as proposed near Sandersville, coal Plant Washington will be among the top 10 industrial sources of mercury in Georgia.

Coastal plain rivers and streams contain higher levels of organic materials, which enhance the mobility of mercury in the environment, thus making it more likely to enter the food chain.

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Reduce Levels of Toxic Mercury in Georgia's Fish and Waters

What's at Stake?

Each year power plants and chemical facilities create thousands of pounds of mercury pollution, which makes its way into our homes and bodies in fish. In 2008, fish consumption advisories were issued in every major river basin in Georgia, the vast majority because the fish tested contained levels of toxic mercury that present a health hazard if regularly consumed.

Subsistence and sport fishermen who eat their catch are at particularly high risk of mercury poisoning if they fish regularly in contaminated waters. Mercury can affect the immune system, alter genetic and enzyme systems, and damage the nervous system, including coordination and senses of touch, taste, and sight.

Developing embryos are particularly sensitive to the permanent effects of mercury and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that one in six women of childbearing age in Georgia has blood mercury levels that can harm a fetus.

Challenges

Two of the biggest sources of mercury pollution are chlorine chemical plants and coal-fired power plants. Coal is naturally contaminated with mercury and when burned to generate electricity, mercury is released into the air through the smokestacks. Georgia Power has agreed to eliminate the bulk of this mercury pollution with the installation of pollution-control devices. However, they are not currently planning on equipping their smaller plants with this technology. Also, two new coal plants have been proposed to date in Georgia – one in Washington County and one in Early County. If constructed, both will add more toxic mercury to our environment.

Chlor-alkali plants use mercury to convert salt to chlorine gas and lye, which is used in soaps and detergents, in plastics, and in the paper-making process. More modern chlor-alkali plants use a cleaner, mercury-free technology, but four U.S. chlor-alkali plants continue to use mercury, including the Olin Corp chlor-alkali plant in Augusta.

At any given time, each of these plants has an average of 200 tons of mercury on site. In virtually every year since records have been kept, chlor-alkali plants have "lost" large amounts of mercury in the manufacturing process. These plants cannot account for where the lost mercury goes. On an annual basis, the loss at Olin's plant is estimated to be more than 500 pounds of mercury. Analysis by the Savannah Riverkeeper has indicated that the channel leading from this plant to the Savannah River is contaminated with levels of mercury requiring hazardous waste clean-up measures.

Next Steps

Mercury poisoning is a serious problem, but the solutions are fairly simple. In the short term, we must urge Georgians to watch their consumption of high-mercury fish. In the longer term, we need mercury polluters to switch to pollution-cutting technologies.

- Continue to fund and support Georgia's extensive fish monitoring program.
- Place signs along rivers and lakes that contain the fish consumption advisories.
- Require mercury emission reductions at smaller power plants or convert these plants to run on clean alternative energy sources – similar to Georgia Power's conversion of Plant Mitchell near Albany.
- Place a moratorium on building new coal-fired power plants.
- Phase out the production of chlorine by mercury cell technology in Georgia.