

Floor Statement on the Comprehensive National Mercury Monitoring Act

Senator Susan M. Collins

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Mr. President, today along with my colleague Senator Carper, I am introducing the *Comprehensive National Mercury Monitoring Act*. This bill would ensure that we have accurate, detailed information about the extent of mercury pollution in the United States.

The issue of mercury emissions is growing in importance around the world. In 2013, the United States was the first country to join and sign the Minamata Convention on Mercury, a global agreement to reduce mercury pollution. The Minamata Convention has since been signed by more than 125 countries, demonstrating the widespread concern that mercury poses a global threat to human health. At present, however, scientists must rely on limited information to understand the critical linkages between mercury emissions and environmental response and human health. Successful design, implementation, and assessment of solutions to the mercury pollution problem require a comprehensive long-term solution. It requires much more information. A system for collecting such information, such as we have for acid rain and other pollution, does not currently exist for mercury – a much more toxic pollutant.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin of significant ecological and public health concern, especially for children and pregnant women. It is estimated that approximately 200,000 children born in our country have been exposed to levels of mercury in the womb that are high enough to impair their neurological development. Mercury exposure has gone down as U.S. mercury emissions have declined, and over the last decade, coal-fired power plants in the U.S. have reduced their mercury emissions by nearly 90 percent. But emission levels remain far too high, given how potent a neurotoxin mercury is.

A comprehensive national mercury monitoring network is needed to protect human health, safeguard our fisheries, and track the effect of emissions reductions. This tracking is important in light of increasing mercury emissions from other countries, including a substantial amount of mercury emissions from China. Mercury can be transported around the globe, meaning emissions and releases can affect human health and environment even in remote locations.

This network is particularly important after the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recent proposal on the Mercury and Air Toxics Standard. Last month, the EPA released a proposal that determined it is no longer "appropriate and necessary" to regulate mercury and toxic air pollution from coal- and oil-fired plants. Mr. President, I just do not understand why EPA would send that signal. While the EPA has not proposed to change the current emissions standards on mercury and the toxic air pollutants in this regulation, the EPA's action has put the

standards in legal jeopardy and could block future efforts to strengthen this standard that is so important to protecting human health and our environment.

By accurately quantifying regional and national changes in atmospheric deposition, ecosystem contamination, and bioaccumulation of mercury in fish and wildlife in response to changes in mercury emissions, a monitoring network would help policy makers, the EPA, scientists, physicians, and the public to better understand the sources, consequences, and trends in mercury pollution in the United States. We must have more comprehensive information and data; otherwise, we risk making misguided policy decisions.

Specifically, our legislation would direct the EPA, in conjunction with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Park Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, and other appropriate Federal agencies, to establish a national mercury monitoring program to measure and monitor mercury levels in the air and watersheds, water and soil chemistry, and in marine, freshwater, and terrestrial organisms across the nation.

Second, it would establish a scientific advisory committee to advise on the establishment, site selection, measurement, recording protocols, and operations of the monitoring program.

Third, our bill would establish a centralized database for existing and newly collected environmental mercury data that can be freely accessed on the Internet and is comprised of data that are compatible with similar international efforts.

The bill would also require a report to Congress every two years on the program, including trends, and an assessment of the reduction in mercury rates that need to be achieved in order to prevent adverse human and ecological effects, and that report would be required every four years.

And finally, Mr. President, the bill authorizes \$95 million over three years to carry out the Act.

Mr. President, I'm pleased to report that this bipartisan bill has earned the endorsement of the American Lung Association, the Biodiversity Research Institute, the Environmental Health Strategy Center, the League of Conservation Voters, and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

A comprehensive, robust national monitoring network for mercury would provide the data needed to help make the decisions to protect the people, particularly pregnant women and babies and children, and the environment of Maine and the entire United States.

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