

Statement by Senator Susan M. Collins
Comprehensive National Mercury Monitoring Act
April 22, 2021

Mr. President, today is Earth Day, and there are many issues, environmental challenges, that each of us could be discussing here on the Senate floor. I have chosen to speak on a bill that I'm introducing today that is called the Comprehensive National Mercury Monitoring Act. I am pleased to be partnering once again with my colleague from Delaware, Senator Carper, who serves as the chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Our bipartisan bill would help ensure that we have accurate information about the extent of mercury pollution in our country.

Mr. President, mercury is a potent neurotoxin. It poses significant ecological and public health concerns, especially for children and pregnant women. Mercury exposure has gone down as U.S. mercury emissions have declined; however, the levels remain unacceptably high. It is estimated that nearly 200,000 children born in the United States have been exposed to levels of mercury in the womb that are high enough to impair their neurological development. This exposure can impose a life-long disability. In addition, the societal costs of neurocognitive deficits associated with mercury exposure are estimated to be approximately \$4.8 billion per year.

In Maine, some of our lands and bodies of water face higher mercury pollution compared to the national average. Maine has been called the "tailpipe of the nation," as the winds carrying pollution, including mercury, from the west drift into the state of Maine.

A system for collecting information, such as we have for acid rain and other forms of pollution, does not currently exist for mercury – which ironically is a more toxic pollutant. A comprehensive national mercury monitoring network is needed to protect human health, safeguard our fisheries, and track the effect of emission reductions. This monitoring network would also help policy makers, scientists, and the public better understand the sources, consequences, and trends of mercury pollution in our country.

Specifically, our legislation would do the following:

First, it would direct the EPA, in conjunction with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Park Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, and other 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 at multiple sites across the nation.

Second, it would establish a scientific advisory committee to advise on the establishment, site selection, measurement, recording protocols, and operations of this 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 that is compatible with similar international efforts.

Fourth, our bill would require a report to Congress every two years on the program, including trend data, and an assessment every four years of the reduction in mercury deposition rates that need to be achieved in order to prevent adverse human effects on our environment.

And fifth, our bill would authorize \$95 million over three years for these purposes.

Mr. President, we must establish a comprehensive, robust national mercury monitoring network, otherwise we will lack the data that we need to help make informed decisions that can help protect the people of Maine and the nation, particularly our children and pregnant women. I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this bipartisan bill, the Comprehensive National Mercury Monitoring Act.