

WV plant criticized for mercury emissions

The Associated Press

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — Chlorine plants in West Virginia and four other states are worse mercury polluters than coal-fired power plants and are out of step with the chlorine industry's change to nonpolluting technology, according to a Washington-based environmental group.

Jacqueline Savitz, director of Oceana's 2-year-old campaign to stop seafood contamination, said more than 115 other chlorine plants have already changed to mercury-free technology.

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Mercury is a neurotoxin that accumulates in fish. Ingesting mercury can cause nerve and brain damage to pregnant women, women of childbearing age and young children. Mercury also can lead to kidney damage in children.

Oceana identified the five worst offenders as Olin Corp.'s chlorine plants in Charleston, Tenn., and Augusta, Ga.; Ashta Chemicals in Ashtabula, Ohio; PPG Industries in Natrium, W.Va.; and ERCO Worldwide in Port Edwards, Wis. Savitz said the chlorine plants in Tennessee and Wisconsin are the largest single mercury polluters in those states.

The group's report says changing to mercury-free technology would mean a "tremendous financial benefit" for the five plants, which each release hundreds of pounds of mercury into the air every year.

PPG Industries spokeswoman Betsy Mallison Bialosky said in a statement that the company has made "significant reductions" in mercury emissions. She said investing in mercury-free technology is "not an economically feasible option" for the plant.

Last month, Kanawha County Circuit Court Judge Irene Berger affirmed an Environmental Quality Board decision to bar PPG from taking two years to come into compliance with water quality standards, including those dictating mercury levels.

Evan Hansen, an environmental science consultant with the West Virginia Rivers Coalition said, in the long run, the elimination of mercury at its Natrium plant could increase sales by \$82.2 million, while saving \$3.7 million on energy over five years.

Hansen said 75 percent of the Natrium plant has already been converted to make chlorine without mercury and it would cost \$71.2 million to complete the conversion.

Chlorine is used in swimming pools, plastic tents and paper towels and is produced in a chemical reaction process that involves pumping a saltwater solution through a vat of mercury, or a mercury cell.

Oceana research shows the average mercury-cell chlorine plant emits four times more mercury than coal-burning power plants that are also receiving attention as mercury polluters.