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EPA urged to control mercury from cement kilns

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(07-23) 20:42 PDT -- Environmental groups Wednesday called on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to enforce a law that would control the thousands of pounds of toxic mercury discharged into the atmosphere every year by cement kilns in the United States.

Two of the nation's worst mercury-emitting cement kilns are in Northern California - in Cupertino and Davenport, north of Santa Cruz. They dump hundreds of pounds of the poison into the air each year and help make the Bay Area's mercury emissions the highest of any region in California.

The emissions are double those of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the next highest.

Large bodies of water - San Francisco Bay, Chesapeake Bay and Lake Huron, among others - are vulnerable to airborne mercury from 150 cement kilns across the country, said a report issued by Earthjustice and the Environmental Integrity Project, two groups specializing in environmental law. Even small amounts of mercury are toxic and can cause numerous health problems, particularly for children.

The groups want the EPA to set standards that require continuous stack monitoring and pollution-control devices, among other measures.

"We are recommending that EPA get off its duff and regulate mercury as it should have more than 10 years ago," said Eric Shaeffer, executive director of the Environmental Integrity Project and former director of the EPA's Office of Regulatory Enforcement.

On Wednesday, the two environmental groups for the first time released a figure estimating that U.S. kilns release 23,000 pounds of mercury compounds a year.

That's nearly double the amount previously reported by the companies. The revised figure comes from the EPA as part of a new rule-making process driven by lawsuits by the Sierra Club and others over the past years.

The mercury comes, in part, from limestone feedstock and petroleum coke fuel.

An EPA spokesman, Dale Kemery, said in a statement that the EPA is in the process of reconsidering the current mercury emissions standards for new and existing cement kilns. Since 1990, U.S. mercury air emissions have been reduced by 45 percent, he said.

The two groups say that 1990 amendments to Clean Air Act required the EPA to identify sectors that are major sources of air toxics and set emission standards. The deadline for cement kiln standards was 1997, and subsequent court orders called for mercury regulations on kilns, they said.

The Northern California cement kilns put out a combined 675 pounds of mercury, according to company reporting for 2006, the latest year available. The amount of mercury emitted from each plant equals mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants, the biggest emitters in the world.

The Bay Area's five oil refineries contribute 58 percent of the region's mercury air emission. The Cupertino cement kiln alone contributes 35 percent, 39 crematoria contribute 5 percent, and 240 other sources contribute 2 percent, according to research by state scientists and the San Francisco Estuary Institute, a scientific research center.

A potent toxic metal, mercury has long been known to interfere with the development of the nervous system, impairing the brain in growing children and affecting IQ, behavior and physical growth. In adults, the toxic metal can affect memory and cognition, and lead to numbness in extremities.

Mercury enters the food chain when it falls into bays and oceans and accumulates in big fish, such as swordfish, tuna and shark. Only 1/70th of a teaspoon dumped into a 20-acre lake can make fish unsafe to eat, scientists say.

In San Francisco Bay, anglers are warned against eating striped bass, carp, catfish and some other species because of mercury contamination.

The two cement kilns in Northern California are:

Hanson Permanente Cement in Cupertino. The plant, which released about 500 pounds of mercury compounds in 2006, is listed in the report the third-worst kiln in the country. The report notes that the Hanson plant "is located within a major residential area in close proximity to several Cupertino schools."

Representatives of Hanson said they wouldn't be able to comment on the emissions.

At the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Brian Batement, director of engineering, said the cement kiln is "within levels that are considered acceptable." The company performed a health risk assessment in 1994, and there have been a series of updates over the years, he said.

CEMEX's RMC Pacific Materials plant in Davenport (Santa Cruz County). The plant

reported about 175 pounds of mercury compounds and is listed as the ninth worst on the kiln list. The plant is "right beside homes and farms along California's coastline and only 40 miles north of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary," the report said.

Jennifer Borgen, a spokeswoman for CEMEX USA, said the plant is in compliance with all requirements regarding mercury. This year, the state approved the plant's health risk assessment sent by the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District. The corporation is working closely with the EPA on new mercury emissions limits, which should be proposed in September, she said.

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