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Mercury pollution neglected by state agency

By Ann Timberlake

Perhaps the most amazing tidbit that came out of the Charleston Post and Courier's recent series on mercury pollution in the Palmetto State was that the Department of Health and Environmental Control owns a sophisticated \$250,000 blood scanner that has been taken off the shelf, plugged in and used to test someone for mercury contamination once in the three years DHEC has owned it.

South Carolina is considered one of the mercury pollution "hotspots" of the country, where 17 of 41 people who regularly eat freshwater fish were found to have high levels of methyl mercury. The element, a pollutant from dirty coal smokestacks, is absorbed by micro-organisms and fish. Today, along more than 1,700 miles of state waterways, you can't eat some species of fish for health reasons. And you are warned to limit significantly your intake of others.

So you would think this high-tech machine bought with Homeland Security money would be in the field on some kind of "Mobile Mercury Testing Van" to check people's blood. Nope. It just sits in a lab in Columbia, according to the newspaper, along with another one that hasn't yet been assembled.

These idle machines symbolize the inept job being done by DHEC in working to combat the risks of mercury in people across the state. For those who have been following DHEC's passive approach to protecting the public's health, it's not a surprise.

It's time for the agency to consider some proactive solutions:

Test people for mercury poisoning. DHEC should get at least one of those machines out on the road to S.C. communities and known mercury hotspots. If DHEC regulators test fish, why can't they test humans?

Post warnings on our waterways. Fish consumption advisories for mercury are posted on DHEC's Web site but not at boat landings and popular fishing holes. DHEC has a responsibility to warn folks in reasonable ways, and the first step toward reducing mercury is informing the public of the danger. Warnings also need to be posted for all the

locations where water pollution, mainly high fecal coliform levels, makes swimming unsafe.

Enforce the law. Instead of handing out a draft air permit allowing Santee Cooper to pump 138 pounds of toxic mercury into the air each year (and just one pound of methyl mercury is enough to contaminate 500,000 pounds of fish tissue), DHEC should enforce last year's Supreme Court ruling that classifies carbon dioxide as a pollutant. This plant will emit 8.7 million tons of carbon dioxide a year into the atmosphere, posing a threat not only to our planet, but to Santee Cooper's rate payers. Federal carbon legislation is on the way and will significantly raise the cost of coal. There is no indication that Santee Cooper took these costs into account when submitting their proposal. But DHEC can and should require Santee Cooper to do a true cost analysis of the plant.

In South Carolina, our low rates belie huge and hidden costs, including higher bills than the national average and human health costs in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Despite their claims, Santee Cooper is not using the best available control technology. As they should have done originally, DHEC needs to suspend the draft air permit until after the Army Corps of Engineers has completed its environmental impact statement.

This may seem like a push for more government regulation, but it's not. DHEC is our state agency, and Santee Cooper is our public utility. Both are owned and paid for by the people of this state, and both are failing their mission to improve and protect the lives of South Carolinians.

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