

# Doctors urge DHEC to test people for mercury

By Doug Pardue  
The Post and Courier  
Wednesday, December 5, 2007

State health officials should immediately begin testing people in the so-called "mercury triangle" of the Pee Dee to see if their health is at risk from mercury pollution, a group of Florence County physicians says.

The physicians are scheduled to discuss their request Thursday in a press conference at the state health department office in Florence.

In a letter sent Nov. 14 to Earl Hunter, commissioner of the Department of Health and Environmental Control, neurosurgeon Ken Kammer called mercury a "pressing public health threat" and urged the department to respond "by undertaking testing of citizens."

Two other physicians, Tim Dancy and Bernetha George, are joining in Kammer's request, according to Nancy Cave of the Coastal Conservation League.

## If you go

Some Pee Dee area physicians are scheduled to gather outside DHEC's Florence offices, 145 E Cheves St., at 12:15 p.m. Thursday to request that DHEC begin testing of people in the Pee Dee region for mercury contamination.

## Want to know more?

To read The Post and Courier's previous stories on mercury, [click here](#).

In his letter, Kammer cited a recent Post and Courier series that showed some people who eat fish from mercury-contaminated sections of the state's rivers have elevated levels of mercury in their bodies. High levels can cause brain damage and other health problems.

State officials have issued warnings about mercury-tainted fish in more than 1,700 miles of rivers, mostly on the coastal plain.

The newspaper's series, "The Mercury Connection," found that coal-fired power plants are among the biggest sources of mercury contamination. The newspaper identified

especially high areas of contamination in a triangular shaped area near the site of Santee Cooper's proposed \$1 billion coal-fired power plant.

Kammer urged the state to reconsider preliminary approval for that power plant because it would send an additional 135 pounds of mercury into the air each year.

"DHEC's mission is to 'promote and protect the health of the public and the environment.' Carrying out that mission in these circumstances can mean only one thing: DHEC needs to suspend its current draft air permit for Santee Cooper's proposed Kingsburg coal plant and immediately begin testing human subjects in the Mercury Triangle region for mercury exposure," the letter said.

Kammer called for DHEC to conduct extensive mercury testing of people along the Little Pee Dee and Lynches rivers.

Thom Berry, DHEC's director of media relations, said late Tuesday that the agency was reviewing Kammer's letter.

Santee Cooper says its coal plant is necessary to keep the lights on. The company also says that its plant will be one of the cleanest in the nation, dramatically reducing mercury and other air pollutants.

At a public hearing in Florence County last month, dozens of businessmen turned out to support the plant's construction. Some said the plant would bring in badly needed jobs and lure more businesses.

Copyright © 1997 - 2007 the Evening Post Publishing Co.