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Speakers back proposal to cut back mercury emissions in Pa.

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By Lindsay Minnema

HARRISBURG -- Like parents everywhere, Deana Weaver of York County wants her young sons, Samuel and Jackson, to eat healthy, nutritious foods.

"It's easy for me to explain why junk food is bad," Ms. Weaver said at a state Environmental Quality Board hearing yesterday.

"But it's inexcusable for me to have to tell Sam he can't consume another tuna sandwich for at least a week because the news is saying tuna is bad" due to possible mercury contamination.

Representing a group called Citizens for Sensible Growth, Ms. Weaver was one of 20 people who spoke at the second of three public hearings on proposed state rules to significantly reduce mercury emissions from power plants. The first hearing was Tuesday in Pittsburgh and the final hearing is today in suburban Philadelphia.

Mercury emissions contaminate fish and other wildlife in Pennsylvania, making them potentially dangerous for her sons to eat, Ms. Weaver said. Studies have shown that high levels of exposure to mercury are especially dangerous to pregnant women, babies and children and can cause attention and language deficits, autism, cerebral palsy and other neurological problems.

Like most of those who testified yesterday, Ms. Weaver supported the state Department of Environmental Protection's efforts to pass strong environmental standards that will cut back on mercury emissions.

Current federal controls aim to cut mercury emissions from coal-fired

power plants 30 percent by 2010 and 70 percent by 2018. The rules allow smaller and older plants -- particularly ones having trouble keeping their mercury emissions low -- to buy credits from other plants that emit well below the limit.

"The federal mercury rule allows Pennsylvania plants to purchase emissions credits rather than make pollution reductions at their stacks," said Melody Zullinger, executive director of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs.

"This is not an acceptable solution for Pennsylvania, especially because we know that the pollution from these plants ends up in our local waters, fish, wildlife and the people who eat them."

A bill passed in the state Senate last month would impose greater reductions in emissions -- 86 percent of 1999 levels by 2018 -- but would keep the so-called "cap-and-trade" program.

"We firmly believe that every affected plant in Pennsylvania will have to install some level of mercury removal technology or be retired," said Doug Biden, president of the Electric Power Generation Association. "But not every plant will be able to install identical levels of emission controls."

Mr. Biden said the cap-and-trade system protects plants that can't afford to install the equipment necessary to meet across-the-board emissions standards. And when plants are protected, the jobs of Pennsylvanians are protected, he said.

"Simply put, we can trade (emission) allowances or we can trade jobs to other states," Mr. Biden said. "A cap-and-trade program will help keep jobs here."

But environmentalists said the cap-and-trade program is unacceptable because it doesn't go far enough to cut back on emissions.

The DEP's proposal is more to their liking. It would do away with the cap-and-trade program and cut emissions 80 percent by 2010 and 90 percent by 2015.

Andrew Wolfe, representing the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, said the DEP proposal would hurt workers at Pennsylvania plants. He charged that "the DEP has not been able to present any credible evidence that specific rules would achieve anymore results than the federal law."

But Ms. Zullinger said the DEP's strict standards are needed to protect the

approximately 1.2 million anglers and 1 million hunters and trappers in Pennsylvania who are impacted by mercury emissions from the state's 36 coal-fired power plants.

"Some argue ? that the only fish that people eat is canned tuna, and for their mercury we should blame China," Ms. Zullinger said. "But that's not the case. We do like to eat the fish we catch here in Pennsylvania."

(Lindsay Minnema is an intern with the Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondents Association.)

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