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Speaker: SESSION 6A -- Panel Presentations & Discussion:

Long Term Storage of Surplus Commodity Mercury

Summary / Abstract

This presentation will detail and document the following topics in support of the position that surplus elemental mercury from governmental and industrial stockpiles should be safely locked up in long term storage rather than released into commerce for resale and reuse.

The State of Maine has among the highest mercury levels in wildlife and the environment in the United States. In addition to local sources, mercury deposition affecting Maine originates from upwind sources from throughout the United States as well as from the global reservoir.

For these reasons, Maine has been a national leader in the development of policies and programs to virtually eliminate human-related sources of mercury releases to the environment.

Maine's experience with the HoltraChem mercury-cell chlor-alkali plant directly informs the policy debate on long term storage of surplus mercury stockpiles. After HoltraChem closed, opposition to the sale of 130 metric tons of leftover mercury was based on sound policy principles and environmental self-interest.

Two facts are most relevant. Mercury cannot be used without much of it eventually escaping into the environment during use and disposal. Since U.S. demand for mercury, which is steadily declining, is met entirely from secondary sources, the U.S. is a net exporter of mercury.

That's why the first shipment of mercury from the HoltraChem site was intended for India, a newly industrialized country that lacks a sound infrastructure for safely managing and recycling mercury, among many other environmental challenges. If the leftover mercury from HoltraChem were sold into commerce, mercury would be released to the environment locally where it was used as well as globally.

As a matter of international environmental justice, unnecessary mercury exports to developing countries will continue to be sharply questioned. Mercury releases from the export of HoltraChem's surplus could also impact Maine's environment by adding to the global atmospheric reservoir, through mercury-added products imported back into Maine and from the import of mercury-contaminated seafood.

So far, federal policy has failed to properly address and resolve the fate of surplus mercury from U.S.-based chlor-alkali plants such as HoltraChem. In the interim, nongovernmental organizations, state policymakers and the private sector are seeking solutions leading to the long term storage of surplus mercury.

Long term storage only works as part of a comprehensive and international policy response aimed at virtually eliminating environmental releases of mercury.

The components of this response should include:

- Continue to reduce consumption of mercury by phasing out its use in favor of readily available, safer alternatives that provide a net benefit to environmental health and safety
- Maximize the collection and recycling of existing stocks of mercury in consumer products as the major source of supply during the transition away from mercury
- End subsidies, enforce environmental and occupational standards, and provide economic incentives to reduce the mining and production of virgin mercury
- Enter into long term safe storage the stockpiles of mercury held by government and industry, including the military and the chlor-alkali industry

What we need now is strong federal leadership to ensure that that policies are enacted and resources devoted to accomplishing these objectives. To some extent, state level policy making in the U.S., private sector market trends and international negotiations can address many of these needs.

However, only decisive policymaking by the United States government can ensure that U.S.-based industrial and governmental stockpiles are entered into long term storage in order to protect public health and the environment in the U.S and globally.