



Durand: Mercury is rising

By Bob Durand/Guest columnist
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MARLBOROUGH — It’s been a little over 10 years since I was Secretary of Environmental Affairs under Gov. Paul Cellucci and Gov. Jane Swift. One of our initiatives was the Mercury is Rising campaign to educate the public and reduce the use of mercury in thermostats, dental offices, batteries and the air we breathe. It was a national model and other states followed suit.

I would not have believed that 10 years later we are still fighting at the national level a clean air standard that would reduce mercury and other toxins in our air. Since that time there have been Republican and Democratic presidents, Democratic and Republican leadership in Congress. Yet no action.

This is not a partisan issue but rather a lack of will due in part to the power of special interest standing in the way of real reform in this area. The U.S. Senate yesterday rejected a measure that would prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from establishing and enforcing a lifesaving clean air standard that would reduce the levels of dangerous mercury pollution in our air. Sen. Scott Brown once again showed his independence, voted against his party and stood up for what’s right and what’s good for the environment and public health here in Massachusetts.

The truth is, the Mercury and Air Toxics Standard will prevent dangerous air emissions of mercury, arsenic, chromium, nickel, and acid gases. These toxic air pollutants, which are also known as hazardous air pollutants, are linked or suspected to be linked to cancer and other serious health issues. Reductions in mercury emissions are particularly beneficial for public health, as mercury hazards are especially serious for women who may become pregnant, unborn babies, and young children, due to its negative effects on the nervous system.

According to the EPA, the mercury standard will save as many as 11,000 lives; prevent as many as 130,000 asthma attacks among children; and prevent as many as 4,700 heart attacks each year. The benefits of these health savings are manifested in lower health costs and reduced mortality rates and EPA estimates the value could be as much as \$90 billion annually.

These aren’t just statistics, this is about our children. In Massachusetts, thousands of our young children are at risk of developing asthma due to high amounts of pollution that they are exposed to everyday.

The coal industry claims that such a measure will cost jobs. The truth is that state and federal data shows that coal mining jobs are on the rise in key coal states like Pennsylvania and West Virginia. For example, the non-partisan West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy reports coal-mining employment has grown 7.4 percent in just the last three years.

The nonpartisan Economic Policy Institute projects that the Mercury and Air Toxics Standard will have a “positive net impact on overall employment – likely leading to the net creation of 84,500 jobs between now and 2015.” The jobs created by the standard, however, would not just be limited to certain industrial sectors. EPI’s study claims “8,000 Jobs would be gained in the utility industry itself,” along with the over 80,500 jobs that would be created to control pollution and 28,000 jobs created by these jobs.

Now those are a lot of numbers to grapple with, but what they really mean is that someone isn’t telling the truth when it comes to the true costs and benefits of protecting our kids from the dangers of mercury air pollution. And it isn’t the EPA with the long nose.

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