

For moms and kids, go mercury-free

By Tonya Bonitatibus | Guest Columnist
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As a mother, it is my responsibility to protect my children that continually gives me cause for concern. How can we protect our children from the dangers lingering in the air and land around them?

It is no doubt my job as a field organizer for the environmental advocacy organization **Oceana's** Campaign to Stop Seafood Contamination, that makes me so keen on the subject of environmental dangers. But just because I am more familiar than most with the toxics lingering in our environment doesn't mean that all of our children aren't equally at risk.

RECENTLY, **OCEANA** released an analysis quantifying some of the hidden social costs of the release of mercury pollution, including releases from the local Olin chemical plant. Our researchers estimated that total mercury emissions, from all sources, have lowered the IQ of more than 400,000 children in the United States annually because of neurological damage.

The analysis examined the specific cost to the American economy of lost wages because of lowered intelligence attributed to mercury releases from chlor-alkali plants. Olin's local plant has caused an estimated \$17 million in lost economic productivity due to lowered IQs over the past 10 years. These costs do not include the price of environmental damage caused by Olin.

Mercury pollution that is released to the environment ends up in our waterways and oceans, contaminating seafood. When a woman eats too much seafood that is highly contaminated, her body can end up passing the pollution on to her unborn baby in the womb. And since babies can be harmed by lower levels of this poison than it takes to harm adults, even small doses can cause irreversible impairment to brain function.

Because of mercury contamination, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division has advised residents to limit their consumption of largemouth bass and legal-sized striped bass from the section of the Savannah River around the Olin plant. Sediment tests from the Olin Corp.'s canal, which leads to the Savannah River, that were released in April 2006 revealed mercury levels about 1,000 times higher than areas upstream of the factory.

For the past four years, citizens here and around the country have been asking Olin to switch to modern, mercury-free technology at its chlor-alkali plants. Though Olin's local mercury-based plant and the one it owns in Tennessee are nowhere near the only sources of mercury pollution in the toxic stew our children are exposed to, their emissions are completely unnecessary. Almost all of the other chlor-alkali plants in the country are equipped with modern, mercury-free technology.

YET OLIN REFUSES to modernize these plants, and has to spend millions of dollars simply to keep up with basic pollution standards. Olin could better spend this money by upgrading to mercury-free technology, which operates in a far more cost-efficient manner than the old equipment. This means that the company would make its investment back in cost savings plus more!

Switching to modern technology not only would be good for our waterways and our kids, but it also would help protect local jobs. As it stands, the equipment at the plant will not be able to compete with more modern plants for much longer. If the company made the decision to switch, Olin would be making a long-term investment in our community.

Olin, do it for us moms! Do it for our children! Protect kids, protect waterways and protect jobs. Please go mercury-free!

(The writer is the Georgia field representative for the environmental group **Oceana**.)