

# Mercury is a Toxic Emission that may hurt our Fishin'

By Reg P. Wydeven  
May 14, 2005

Tomorrow marks the celebration of the Mercuralia, the ancient Roman festival honoring their god Mercury. Each May 15, Roman merchants would sprinkle their heads and their merchandise with water from the well near his temple. The Romans believed this would bring them good fortune during the upcoming trade season because Mercury was the god of commerce and profit.

Because of his speed, Mercury was also the messenger of the gods. He was commonly depicted wearing talia, or winged sandals, and a petasus, or winged hat. Mercury also carried a caduceus, which was a staff with two intertwined snakes and represented his status as a messenger, indicating he should not be harmed.

Words such as market, merchandise and merchant are derived from Mercury from his status as the god of trade. The planet closest to the sun and revolves around it the quickest is also named after this swift god. A car manufacturer was also named after Mercury, in addition to a particular toxic metal that is causing quite a stir in the Dairy State.

Wisconsin has just joined a group of states, including California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York and Vermont, in a lawsuit against the federal government initiated by New Jersey for new environmental regulations that allegedly fail to protect children and expectant mothers from dangers posed by mercury emissions.

These new regulations purportedly could allow 19 states to increase mercury emissions in the next five years by establishing caps that are higher than current levels. Presently, Wisconsin has some of the most restrictive mercury laws in the U.S., requiring all power plants to cut emissions by 40 percent by 2010 and by 75 percent by 2015. The new regulations, issued by the Environmental Protection Agency, propose to cut mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants by nearly half over the next 15 years.

In the lawsuit, the New Jersey attorney general claims that the EPA exempts power plants from having to install the strictest emissions control technology available, which would cut mercury pollution by 90 percent.

When mercury is emitted from power plants, it settles into neighboring waterways and subsequently accumulates in fish. When people then eat these fish, the toxin can potentially cause neurological and developmental problems, especially in fetuses and children. When I was young, I remember my mom was very concerned about my exposure to heavy metal, but I thought she was talking about music.

Ninety percent of the lakes and streams in Wisconsin have high levels of mercury and every lake and stream in the state is subject to a fish consumption advisory. Nonetheless, Friday night fish fries are very popular in Wisconsin and we consume far more fish than the national average.

Governor Doyle wholeheartedly supports the lawsuit, explaining that mercury pollution seriously threatens women of childbearing age, pregnant women and young children, not to mention Wisconsin's sport fishing industry, which employs 30,000 people. A Democrat, Doyle accuses President Bush of catering to big business by allowing the more lax regulations.

In addition to being the god of business, in his role as messenger, Mercury was also the intermediary between the four elements – air, earth, fire and water. If this environmental debate gets any more heated, both sides could surely use some of his divine intervention.

*This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2005 McCarty Curry Wydeven Peeters & Haak, LLP. All rights reserved.*