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EPA rule could help Adirondack lakes, streams

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Anglers might be able to safely eat predatory fish, including bass and lake trout, in the Adirondacks someday, as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rolled out Wednesday its first sweeping crackdown on mercury-spewing power plants.

"These standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health and especially for the health of our children," EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said in a prepared statement.

Environmental groups and regulators have been pushing for 20 years for a crackdown on coal and oil-burning power plants, which emit the majority of the nation's mercury, as well as other air pollutants. Under the new rule, power plants will have four years to reduce the amount of toxins they emit by 90 percent.

Mercury, along with nitrogen dioxide and sulfur oxide, have been blamed for the consistent degradation of water quality in the Adirondack Park. The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) rule is the second such edict EPA has imposed on electricity producers this year. It rolled out nitrogen dioxide and sulfur oxide regulations earlier this year.

Data collected by the state Department of Environmental Conservation suggests the vast majority of acid rain and air pollutants that fall in the Adirondacks originate from out-of-state sources, especially the power plant-rich Ohio River Valley.

The DEC, which monitors dozens of mercury-impaired waterways in the Adirondacks, has for years advised against human consumption of most predatory fish because of unsafe mercury levels.

"We hope the combination of these rules will bring an end to the problems," said John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

DEC reports 15 percent of New York's lakes are mercury impaired. Those lakes account for nearly 70 percent of the state's total acreage of water bodies.

Dozens of Adirondack lakes and streams have also suffered from acid rain degradation due to nitrogen dioxide and sulfur oxide pollution, according to the DEC-funded Adirondack Lakes Survey Corp.

Even if the EPA regulation is successful, it could take years for mercury levels in Adirondack lakes and ponds to return to normal, officials said.

Federal regulators predict utility companies will spend \$9.6 billion each year for the next four years to install the control systems that will allow them to comply with the new rule.

The coal and oil electricity industries are fighting the regulation.

The American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, an industry lobbying organization, estimates the mercury regulation will force the closure of power plants and drive up electricity prices, costing the nation 1.5 million jobs over the next eight years.

Organization President Steve Miller said the mercury rule is an attack on the wallets of average Americans, and Congress should step in and overturn it.

"This new rule is likely to be the most expensive rule ever imposed on coal-fueled power plants, which are responsible for providing affordable electricity," Miller said. "People's jobs, their family budgets and their access to affordable electricity are at stake."

Read more: http://poststar.com/news/local/epa-rule-could-help-adirondack-lakes-streams/article_3a987a52-2ce7-11e1-b2f8-0019bb2963f4.html#ixzz1hN6a2iuh