Wall Street Journal
May 25, 2011
"The Myth of Killer Mercury"
By Willie Soon and Paul Driessen

The Environmental Protection Agency recently issued 946 pages of new rules requiring that U.S. power plants sharply reduce their (already low) emissions of mercury and other air pollutants. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson claims that while the regulations will cost electricity producers $10.9 billion annually, they will save 17,000 lives and generate up to $140 billion in health benefits.

There is no factual basis for these assertions. To build its case against mercury, the EPA systematically ignored evidence and clinical studies that contradict its regulatory agenda, which is to punish hydrocarbon use.

Mercury has always existed naturally in Earth's environment. A 2009 study found mercury deposits in Antarctic ice across 650,000 years. Mercury is found in air, water, rocks, soil and trees, which absorb it from the environment. This is why our bodies evolved with proteins and antioxidants that help protect us from this and other potential contaminants.

Another defense comes from selenium, which is found in fish and animals. Its strong attraction to mercury molecules protects fish and people against buildups of methylmercury, mercury's biologically active and more toxic form. Even so, the 200,000,000 tons of mercury naturally present in seawater have never posed a danger to any living being.

How do America's coal-burning power plants fit into the picture? They emit an estimated 41-48 tons of mercury per year. But U.S. forest fires emit at least 44 tons per year; cremation of human remains discharges 26 tons; Chinese power plants eject 400 tons; and volcanoes, subsea vents, geysers and other sources spew out 9,000-10,000 additional tons per year.

All these emissions enter the global atmospheric system and become part of the U.S. air mass. Since our power plants account for less than 0.5% of all the mercury in the air we breathe, eliminating every milligram of it will do nothing about the other 99.5% in our atmosphere.

In the face of these minuscule risks, the EPA nevertheless demands that utility companies spend billions every year retrofitting coal-fired power plants that produce half of all U.S. electricity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, which actively monitors mercury exposure, blood mercury counts for U.S. women and children decreased steadily from 1999-2008, placing today's counts well below the already excessively safe level established by the EPA. A 17-year evaluation of mercury risk to babies and children by the Seychelles Children Development Study found "no measurable cognitive or behavioral effects" in children who eat several servings of ocean fish every week, much more than most Americans do.

The World Health Organization and U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry assessed these findings in setting mercury-risk standards that are two to three times less restrictive than the EPA's.

The EPA ignored these findings. Instead, the agency based its "safe" mercury criteria on a study of Faroe Islanders, whose diet is far removed from our own. They eat few fruits and vegetables, but they do feast on pilot-whale meat and blubber that is laced with mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)—but very low in selenium. The study has limited relevance to U.S. populations.

As a result, the EPA's actions can be counted on to achieve only one thing—which is to further advance the Obama administration's oft-stated goal of penalizing hydrocarbon use and driving a transition to unreliable renewable energy.

The proposed standards will do nothing to reduce exaggerated threats from mercury and other air pollutants. Indeed, the rules will worsen America's health and well-being—especially for young children and women of child-bearing age. Not only will they raise heating, air conditioning and food costs, but they will scare people away from eating nutritious fish that should be in everyone's diet.

America needs affordable, reliable electricity. It needs better health and nutrition. It needs an EPA that focuses on real risks, instead of wasting hard-earned taxpayer and consumer dollars fabricating dangers and evidence.

Mr. Soon, a natural scientist at Harvard, is an expert on mercury and public health issues. Mr. Driessen is senior policy adviser for the Committee For A Constructive Tomorrow (CFACT).