

UMSL Economist Kosnik, Movie Star Portman Join

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Cate Marquis

Dr. Lea-Rachel Kosnik, associate Professor of Economics at University of Missouri-St. Louis and several other scientist mothers have teamed with movie star mother-to-be Natalie Portman to ask the Environmental Protection Agency to set the highest standards for limiting mercury pollution in the atmosphere.

Kosnik, a microeconomist, is an expert in hydropower and the economics of alternate energy. She is also a new foster mother. The other scientists, who are also mothers, joining her in this request have expertise in the fields of climate science and environmental health. The letter, with the other scientists' names and information on them are posted on Kosnik's website www.umsl.edu/~kosnikl. The request was sent in conjunction with Environmental America and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

EPA has been in the process of drafting new standards on limiting toxic air pollution, including mercury, from coal-fired power plants and large industrial facilities. The letter includes a mother-to-mother appeal and was sent to EPA head Lisa Jackson. In part it reads "we urge you to make these new standards as strong as possible to protect children across the country for generations to come."

Mercury is a powerful neurotoxin. One in six women in America have enough mercury in their system that it could harm their unborn child if they became pregnant. Exposure to it in utero carries a risk of developmental disorders, learning disabilities and lower I.Q. to the developing fetus.

By far, the greatest source of mercury pollution in the U. S. atmosphere comes from coal-fired power plants. The second highest is from other industrial sources, called boilers by the EPA.

On Thursday, February 23, the EPA announced its new rules to limit air pollution from industrial sources, called "Boiler Maximum Achievable Control Technology." The new rules for coal-fired power plants have not yet been announced.

The standard for mercury pollution just announced does not meet that highest standard that was requested in the letter. The Union of Concerned Scientists described it as “modest in comparison to the standard proposed last April.”

Although environmental groups express disappointment in that the ruling was not more stringent, the new standard is an improvement and many have counted it as both a good outcome and a fair compromise for business, which sought flexibility for smaller operations. It could have been far worse, given the overwhelming influence of industrial lobbying and their massive amounts of funding.

Clearly, mercury air pollution is a public health threat. Yet the public health interest, what will benefit the country as a whole and the greatest number of people in this country, increasingly takes a place behind the wishes of large multinational corporations. A reasonable amount of restraint on industrial pollution is more likely to provide economic benefits and jobs in this country, as plants are refitted to meet new standards, than any real harm to a company’s profitability. Arguments that clean air regulations hurt business often come with hints that permitting pollution creates jobs, although it omits that the jobs created are likely to be in other countries. The public health costs of pollution need to be part of the equation in weighing the pros and cons.

Yet increasingly, under our pay-for-access political system, only the wishes of large businesses are heard in public policy matters. Since the Supreme Court has equated money in politics with free speech, it means those with the most money get to shout down all other views, not matter what is the best for the country. It is better that both sides get to speak and the whole picture considered.