

WASHINGTON, DC (October 21, 2009) – In a major step toward improving public health and curbing the severe risks of toxic Mercury pollution, Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-IL, passed legislation today through the Energy & Commerce Committee that forbids the use of mercury-cell technology in the production of chlorine within 5 years of enactment.

“Mercury is an extremely dangerous neurotoxin that poses severe risks to public safety. After polluting waterways, the toxin is consumed by fish and later humans. The poison can harm fetuses and grown adults alike – no one is immune,” said Rep. Schakowsky. “Once mercury builds up in the body, it can cause a variety of health problems that can be both subtle – such as numbness in fingers – and quite serious – such as an increased risk of heart disease and neurological disorders. We have taken a major step today to protect the public from the harmful toxin and made it clear to mercury polluting companies that they will have to change their ways.”

The Mercury Pollution Reduction Act, H.R. 2190, passed the committee markup ## to ##. The legislation prohibits four plants from exporting mercury immediately upon enactment but does not force the plants to close, just convert to existing cleaner production method. Since 1974, more than 116 plants have shifted to Mercury-free technology. Aside from enjoying the clear conscience the transition provides, plants that shifted to membrane-cell technology generally have achieved increases in energy efficiency of 25 to 37 percent per ton of chlorine produced.

The mercury cell chlor-alkali technology has been used since 1894, and is both extremely inefficient and very bad for public health. On average, chlor-alkali plants that use mercury emit four times the average amount of mercury. Olin’s chlor-alkali plant in Tennessee is the state’s largest single source of mercury air emissions.

The four remaining plants in the United States are: Olin's facility in Charleston, Tennessee; Olin's Facility in Augusta, Georgia; ASHTA's facility in Ashtabula, Ohio; and PPG's facility in Natnum, West Virginia.

Unlike coal-fired power plants in which Mercury emissions can only be reduced, technology can completely eliminate mercury pollution from chlor-alkali production. Thus, the release of tons of mercury to the environment reported by these companies, not to mention the many more tons "lost" by mercury cell chlorine plants, is entirely unnecessary.

"The greatest concern about mercury surrounds its effects on the early development of the fetus and on later childhood development," said Rep. Schakowsky. "Through no fault of their own, but rather the selfishness of these companies, children born after being exposed to the toxin will likely fight learning disabilities their entire life."

Methylmercury can travel across the placenta from the mother to the fetus, meaning exposure to the dangerous poison often begins in the womb during a baby's most vulnerable developmental period. Not only does it take lower levels to harm a developing fetus than it would an adult, but mercury levels are also magnified in the womb. Mercury can irreversibly impair children's brain functions as they grow.

Infants and children exposed to high doses of mercury may have problems with attention span, language, visual-spatial skills, memory and coordination. Very high levels of exposure in children can lead to brain damage, speech problems, seizures, blindness and mental retardation.

Making the transition is good for business. It is estimated that it will cost Olin \$100 million to convert its Augusta plant to a cleaner technology. Over the past decade, \$158 million in shared losses have resulted from continuing the use of inefficient methods and outdated technology. In the long run, Olin and the other companies will be able to recoup the initial expense of conversion by using a more efficient energy source.

After introduction on April 30, 2009, the legislation received the endorsement of 47 co-sponsors, including: Reps. Baldwin, Berman, Blumenauer, Capps, Carnahan, DeGette, DeLauro, Eshoo, Ellison, Farr, Grijalva, Hare, Hirono, Lee, Moran, Napolitano, Norton, Pallone, and Woolsey. And has been formally endorsed by the Sierra Club, Oceana, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace USA, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and Riverkeepers.