

Statement from DES Commissioner Thomas Burack and NH Attorney General Kelly Ayotte on a New Scientific Study That Links Mercury Pollution Hotspots to U.S. Coal-Fired Power Plants and Other Sources

January 9, 2007

The New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (DES) and the New Hampshire Attorney General's Office commended today's formal release of cutting edge research on mercury contamination in the Northeast. The Hubbard Brook Research Foundation announced through two reports to be published in Bioscience magazine the results of a three-year research effort to determine the severity of mercury contamination. They report five known and nine suspected biological mercury "hotspots" in the Northeast, the worst being located in southeastern New Hampshire downwind from a coal-fired power plant.

The reports suggest that coal-fired power plants are a major contributor and raise questions about the current federal mercury rule for power plants, which, they conclude, can result in increased mercury emissions in some areas of the United States. They also demonstrate that controlling power plant mercury emissions, as New Hampshire is doing, leads to measurable environmental recovery.

Mercury is a neurotoxin that affects fish, wildlife and human health. It accumulates in the food chain. Fish advisories have been issued in every state to caution against eating mercury-contaminated fish, which can pose the greatest risk to children and women of childbearing age. New Hampshire's hotspot shows mercury concentrations in fish at more than 10 times higher than EPA's human health criterion. DES has also tracked the mercury-in-fish content over recent years and found results consistent with these new studies.

Tom Burack, DES Commissioner said, "This research demonstrates the effectiveness of our existing mercury reduction efforts, especially mercury emission reductions from municipal waste combustors. It also substantiates our most recent legislation adopted in 2006 that will reduce mercury emissions from power plants by at least 80%, without allowing participation in the federal government's controversial mercury emission trading program."

New Hampshire's Attorney General, Kelly A. Ayotte, who has joined a multi-state legal challenge to the federal mercury rule, said, "These studies support our position that power plants allowed to trade mercury emissions will not help reduce mercury 'hotspots' around those coal-fired power plants and that the federal government should adopt a stricter national program that applies to all coal-fired power plants."

DES modeling also concurs with the studies conducted by the researchers, indicating that local mercury impacts can be 4-5 times higher than estimated by the federal government.

###