

editor's note



IF YOU'RE OF THE SAME GENERATION AS ME, YOU UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE MEMORIES OF PLAYING WITH MERCURY AS A CHILD. It might have come from a classmate or from a broken thermometer, but pushing around this glob of liquid metal was always fascinating.

Fortunately, my children will never have that experience. As we all know now, mercury is an extremely toxic element. Mercury can damage children's developing brains, and particle pollution is linked to a wide variety of serious health effects, including aggravated asthma, irregular heartbeat, heart attacks, and premature death in people with heart and lung disease.

After years of diddling, the EPA finally enacted standards that would reduce mercury emissions by 92%.

Unfortunately, that solution is way too simplistic. The biggest contributor of mercury emissions is the cement industry, who rightly argues that forcing them to spend \$3.4 billion over three years to clean up their act would negatively impact U.S. employment while not actually helping to clean up the environment. The problem is the regulations will have the effect of shifting cement production to other countries that have even worse environmental standards. And mercury emissions don't respect national boundaries. (As I've previously reported, recent studies reveal that on some days as much as one-quarter of the particulate matter in the air above Los Angeles originates in China.)

So what's the solution? I believe that we need to start taking responsibility for the products we purchase. However, the solution can't rest on the actions of individuals as that would unfairly penalize those who try to do the right thing. Instead, we need a national policy that imposes tariffs on imported products that do not meet our environmental and labor regulations. (And not just cement; the policy should be broad-based— toys, agricultural products, etc.). I believe this is the fairest approach. Products, whether they are pro-

duced in Paris (Illinois) or Paris (France) need to meet the same standards. We're one globe and if we're paying for health issues created by manufacturers outside the U.S. we should collect fees from those manufacturers to assume some of the costs.

I'm a strong believer in the free market; but I also believe it is the responsibility of government to protect its citizens. And it's just not fair to impose restrictions on our industries only to have manufacturers in other countries benefit by worsening the problem.

Unfortunately, our shortsighted government refuses to look at the broader issue. Rather than taking a world-view, they limit their focus to the domestic market. Rather than expand our environmental concerns through the use of trade policy, the House of Representatives cut the EPA funding needed to administer and enforce the new regulations and now appears ready to completely eviscerate the rules.

One of the greatest burdens on business today is rising healthcare costs. Every dollar spent on reducing mercury emissions will reduce healthcare costs by \$7-\$19. Fighting this health issue worldwide should be a top priority of our elected officials.

Wasn't life a lot simpler when we were allowed to play with mercury?

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