

Wednesday, October 15, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS)
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 120F
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

We have devoted our careers to addressing the dangerous health implications of toxic chemicals in our environment.

We are reaching out now to ask you to be a strong health ally within the Trump Administration. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, your fellow Cabinet officer and Make America Healthy Again Commission member, is considering a proposal that would allow industry to discharge more toxic chemicals, such as mercury, arsenic, and selenium, as well as other hazardous pollutants like the halogen compounds bromide, chloride, and iodide, into Americans' waterways.

At your confirmation hearing, you said, "The same chemicals that kill fish also make people sick." More recently, you talked about the need to fulfill "a long-overdue promise to protect our most vulnerable populations from unnecessary mercury exposure."

We strongly agree. That's why we urge you to intercede with the EPA and the White House to stop this policy change before it harms millions of Americans.

A Decision You Can Affect

- On October 2, 2025, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed postponing for 5 years deadlines for coal-fired power plants to comply with Clean Water Act limits on toxic metals and other pollutants. These standards—finalized under the 2024 *Steam Electric Effluent Limitation Guidelines (ELG) rule*—were designed to prevent the discharge of mercury, arsenic, selenium, and other hazardous pollutants into rivers, lakes, and drinking water sources.
- When issuing the 2024 rule, the EPA estimated that the new standards would cut 660 million pounds of toxic pollution from entering waterways every year, contaminating the drinking water of over 30 million people. Furthermore, they estimated that water quality and non-water quality improvements in this rule will provide \$3.2 billion in public health benefits each year, an amount three to six times greater than the costs to industry.

- Now, the EPA is proposing to delay those safeguards as it also considers weakening the requirements in a future rulemaking. It argues that continued toxic pollution is justified to reduce compliance costs for coal plant owners (\$30–\$200 million annually) and meet rising energy demand from AI and data centers.
- Those short-term corporate savings come at an immense cost to public health. As you have noted, mercury alone is “a lethal neurotoxin...that causes brain damage and IQ loss in unborn children, injures kidneys and hearts, and results in tens of billions of dollars in healthcare costs every year in the U.S.” In the 2024 rule, EPA estimated that every year after industry complied with the rule, 201,850 infants would be protected from losing IQ points in utero from their mothers eating fish contaminated by these coal-fired power plants.
- EPA’s October 14 public hearing on the proposed postponement saw people from communities across the country raise concerns about the proposal's impacts on their health and question why their health was now secondary to the bottom lines of power utilities and data center owners.
- Despite these concerns, EPA is set to immediately move forward unless it receives significant adverse comments from government or industry stakeholders. The public comment period closes on **November 3**.

Your Record and Opportunity

At your Senate confirmation hearing on January 29, 2025, you said, "human health and environmental injuries are intertwined.”

You have a powerful voice in this moment.

We urge you to use it. Please speak publicly and directly with EPA leadership and go on the record to oppose this policy change before the November 3 deadline. Protecting strong wastewater standards for coal power plants is essential to safeguarding the daily drinking water that millions of Americans depend on.

Americans’ health is at risk. Your leadership can make the difference.

Sincerely,



Former Director, NIEHS and NTP, Scholar in Residence, Duke University



Former Director, Office of Science and Technology in EPA’s Office of Water