

In Ireland, poor people used to burn peat for fuel. Barely a step ahead of that, some American power plants burn semi-fossilized peat (lignite) to run their generators. It turns out that those power plants produce about a third of all the toxic mercury emissions of the entire industry. Even more remarkably, about half of those mercury emissions come from just three power plants spewing toxic smoke. Here the tawdry trio of polluters.

The first of the toxic trio is the Oak Grove power plant, which is located between Dallas and Austin. It's in Robertson county, which is about 40% black and Hispanic, with about 20% of the population below the poverty line. The plant is owned by Luminant, a subsidiary of Vistra, which has the distinction of being the highest CO₂ emitter in the country. It also emits about 260 pounds of toxic mercury a year.

The Martin Lake power plant is also owned by Luminant. It emits about 350 pounds of mercury a year. The plant is located in Rusk County in east Texas, which is about two-thirds white and has about 10% below the poverty line.

Coal Creek, the largest power plant in North Dakota, also emits about 350 pounds a year. The plant is "proudly owned" (the company's own language) by Rainbow Energy Center, a name that's more or less equivalent to putting lipstick on a pig. The only blessing is that more or less no one seems to live in the vicinity, though the plant's emissions waft eastward toward Minnesota.

Combined these three plants alone emit close to a thousand pounds of mercury per year, out of a U.S. total of six thousand pounds. They also emit unknown amounts of other toxic metals. The health impacts of mercury most prominently include neurological damages to children and developing fetuses. Mercury can also cause cardiovascular damage, endocrine disruption, diabetes risk, and weakened immune systems.

Power plants burning lignite get favored treatment under the current mercury regulation. EPA's new rule would eliminate this situation, bringing the toxic emissions from Martin Lake, Coal Creek, and Oak Grove under control. It's about time.

UPDATE: EPA issued a final rule eliminating the lignite exemption on April 25, 2024, which will force the plants to use the same pollution controls as other coal plants.