

Maryland's signature fish is under assault from mercury pollution

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In late March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it would stop enforcing many anti-pollution laws because of the COVID-19 pandemic. On Aug. 31, as the Trump administration recently announced, the EPA is ending its lax enforcement approach. But that might be in the eye of the beholder. If there's been a consistent policy

coming out of Washington these past three years, it's the White House's desire to deregulate polluters of all types but most notably in the energy sector (and more on that in a moment). To suggest the EPA is a paper tiger is probably an insult to paper. And there is inevitably a price to be paid for this laxity whether it's the official pandemic-related five months extra-hands-off or just years of enforcement stand-down unrelated to the coronavirus.

As if to underscore that point, some U.S. Geological Survey scientists have been studying freshwater [fish](#) caught in Maryland waters for [mercury poisoning](#), and the results are not good. The study first published in late May in a [scientific journal](#), but reported more broadly by the nonprofit Bay Journal in late June, found nearly half of all samples turned out to have levels of what's known as methylmercury in concentrations so high they were unsafe to eat. Methylmercury is a neurotoxin that attacks the human nervous system and can be especially harmful to pregnant women and their fetuses causing permanent cognitive harm. It's widely prevalent in the environment, and most people have trace amounts in their bodies. But ingesting fish with high levels of methylmercury can have serious adverse health effects.

And what species found in Maryland waters turned out to have the highest amounts of this toxin, according to the research? That would be rockfish, or striped bass, the official state fish beloved not only as a worthy opponent by recreational fisherman but for its dinner plate appeal. Like oysters and blue crabs, rockfish are a Maryland tradition that, with all due respect to National Bohemian beer, practically define the Land of Pleasant Living. Alas, it appears the fish are exposed to mercury in their formative years: As an anadromous species, striped bass give birth in freshwater and their offspring live there in rivers for their first two years of life even as most adults return to the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean.

And where is this methylmercury coming from? Researchers aren't certain what accounts for some variation in their samples (results were highest in the Susquehanna and Potomac rivers, for example) but the biggest single source is thought to be power plants that run on fossil fuels, especially coal. The mercury is contained in the fuel, released by combustion into the air where it eventually settles on the ground and then runs off into creeks, streams, lakes and rivers. It enters the food chain from bacteria to insects and then small amounts gradually build up in the fish. Needless to say, Maryland is not the only place where this bioaccumulation of mercury in fish is taking place; it's a worldwide phenomenon and will take many years to potentially undo.

Yet here's what is most important. Efforts to reduce fossil fuel consumption, to address coal-fired [power plants](#) have been thwarted by the Trump EPA. Earlier this year, the EPA took steps to specifically weaken the Obama administration's Mercury and Air Toxic Standards that regulated power plant emissions. And that's on top of rolling back carbon emissions standards (Affordable Clean Energy Rule) the Trump administration believed were causing economic harm to the coal industry. And that's on top of backing off enforcement of multi-state Chesapeake Bay cleanup efforts. So, it's not as if the EPA was asleep at the switch, it's more like they've been deliberately flipping the switch to the benefit of monied special interests but to the broad detriment of the public including those who like a serving of broiled filet of [freshwater fish](#) once in a while.

This consistent loosening of pollution standards deserves greater public scrutiny yet in the midst of a global pandemic, an [economic recession](#), widespread protests over [police violence](#) and pervasive racism and inequality on top of the day-to-day ineptitude, lies and destructive incivility that's spewed into the firmament by this White House, this can get lost. When you can't safely eat a fish caught from a river, attention must be paid. The question is not so much how did this happen as it's

been decades in the making. The question that matters is, what are you going to do about it? Whether on duty or off, the Trump EPA has decided the answer is: Not much.

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