



Creation waits
"matrix of grace"
and where
are we in it?

Living Earth Monthly Reflection

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Mercury and the proper role of government: how much regulation is too much?

**By Mary Minette
ELCA Director for Environmental Education and Advocacy**

"And there is, indeed, the greatest need to pray for temporal authority and government, as that by which most of all God preserves to us our daily bread and all the comforts of this life. For though we have received of God all good things in abundance, we are not able to retain any of them or use them in security and happiness, if He did not give us a permanent and peaceful government. For where there are dissension, strife, and war, there the daily bread is already taken away, or at least checked."

- Martin Luther, The Large Catechism (The Lord's Prayer)

The proper role of government, and particularly government regulations, is a hot topic in our country at the moment. Some believe too many regulations slow economic growth and prevent companies from creating new jobs. Others believe our government plays a critical role in ensuring our economy functions fairly, and protecting our families and our communities.

But what if a regulation costs a business some money and time, but curtails emissions of a really harmful substance?

When I was about ten years old, my mom broke a mercury thermometer. After warning me that mercury was poisonous and not to touch it, she scooped it onto a piece of paper. Then she let me see the silvery, and strangely solid liquid, before she threw it and the broken glass in the trash.

Please take note—this is NOT the way to dispose of a broken mercury thermometer, should you happen to have one and break it (just in case, [here's](#) what you should do).

Today, we know a lot more about the dangers of mercury than my mom did all those years ago. Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin, even in tiny amounts. Its impact on a developing brain is so substantial that young children and women of childbearing age should avoid exposure to it, such as from eating fish.

Many states have [issued mercury warnings](#) about some types of fish caught in their lakes, rivers and streams. Large ocean fish such as swordfish and king mackerel contain enough mercury that the Environmental Protection Agency warns that women who are pregnant or may become pregnant and young children [should not eat them at all](#).

So how did the mercury get into so many of our lakes, rivers and fish?

[The majority of U.S. mercury emissions—about 50 percent—come from burning coal for electricity.](#) Mercury is present in coal, is emitted into the air when coal is burned, attaches itself to rain as it falls to earth, ends up in our water and then in fish.

Another source of mercury and other toxic air emissions is large industrial boilers and solid waste incinerators.

[This past week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a new set of regulations for mercury emissions from these sources.](#) Critics of the move claim that this is one more burdensome regulation that will hurt businesses and our slowly-recovering economy. [But according to the EPA, they have worked to tailor the rule narrowly, to regulate only the largest sources of toxic air pollutants to get the greatest possible benefit while impacting fewer facilities.](#)

This new rule will prevent approximately 1.4 tons of mercury from reaching our air, and the new controls will have the added benefit of reducing other types of air pollutants as well, helping to protect people

who suffer from asthma and other respiratory problems.

Something to think about

When it comes to a substance as toxic as mercury, how much regulation is too much? How much is too little? How would you decide?

Some new (and recycled) resources to use

This year's National Council of Churches congregational resource for Earth Day explores environmental justice through the lens of community. Download a copy at www.elca.org/advocacy.

We will not be publishing a new series of reflections for Lent this year. Instead we are recycling! All of the Living Earth reflections from 2009 and 2010 can be found [here](#) for your use during the upcoming season of Lent. You can also find environmental worship resources [here](#).

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