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As a former senior air policy analyst in the Office of Air and Radiation during the Carter, Reagan and first Bush administrations, I have some professional advice for Jeffrey R. Holmstead, the assistant EPA administrator who wants to defer the deadline for major mercury reductions by power plants until 2018 [news story, Dec. 30]:

Measure mercury in the soil in Alexandria and in the hair of Alexandria residents who live close to Pepco's Station C on the Potomac.

As long ago as the mid-1970s, this plant, burning a megaton of coal a year with an appreciable mercury content, was dumping tons of mercury into Alexandria's air annually. Because mercury has a high atomic weight, much of it will be dropped within a kilometer or two of the plant.

The accumulation of mercury in the soil was discovered in the late 1970s by the Alexandria Health Department, which ignored it because the EPA did not regulate mercury from power plants.

After EPA scientists make these measurements and compare them with EPA's mercury standards for soil and body burden, Mr. Holmstead may want to reassess whether the nation can afford to give the industry until 2018 to reduce mercury emissions.

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