to make sure that the taxes they pay are effectively used also. The GAO has just talked about. The GAO has made suggestions. They suggested more independent planning by those with no vested interest in geographic locations. They also recommend that the VA consider consolidating services, developing partnerships with other health care providers, and replacing obsolete assets with modern ones that address the health needs of today's and future veterans.

I have a bill, Mr. Speaker, that addresses the concerns. It is H.R. 2116. I am hoping that this bill will come to the floor. One of the major components of my bill, called the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act, contains elements targeted at capital asset management issues, in fact, what I like to call enhanced stakeholder involvement for all of the veterans. My bill offers a blueprint to help position the VA for the future. The point is that VA has the closure authority. The administration can take those facilities that are obsolete and not being used and close them, but it does not want to. I think what we need to do is allow a new process to get this started. So my bill calls for a process to be sure that decisions on closing hospitals can only be made based upon comprehensive planning with veterans' participation, and that is very important and very appropriate.

The bill sets numerous safeguards in place and would specifically provide that VA would only stop operating a hospital and walk away from its responsibilities to veterans. It must, quote, reinvest savings in a new, improved treatment facility or improve services in the area.

So in turn, Mr. Speaker, I think it provides the reforms we need for the next millennium that could advance the goals of the GAO, and I think it is another important feature towards getting better efficient use of the money.

### Omnibus Mercury Emissions Reduction Act of 1999

The Speaker pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. GUTKNECHT) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. GUTKNECHT. Mr. Speaker, very soon the Congress will be engaged in a very vicious debate about milk. And that may surprise some people; but when we start talking about milk marketing order reforms, it is amazing how aggressive some Members can become.

Mr. Speaker, in the last couple of days our colleague, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. GREEN) and myself have introduced the Omnibus Mercury Emissions Reduction Act of 1999, a bill to reduce mercury emissions by 95 percent nationwide. I am pleased to be joined by 27 of my colleagues who have agreed to be original cosponsors of this important bipartisan legislation.

Although mercury is a naturally occurring element, it has built up to dangerous levels in the environment. Mercury pollution impairs the reproductive and nervous systems of freshwater, fish and wildlife, especially loons. It can be extremely harmful when ingested by humans. It is especially dangerous to pregnant women, children, and developing fetuses. Ingesting mercury can severely damage the central nervous system, causing numbness in extremities, impaired vision, kidney disease, and in some cases even death.

According to EPA's mercury study report, products that contain mercury poses a significant threat to human health, and concentrations of mercury in the environment are increasing.

The report concludes that mercury pollution in the U.S. comes primarily from a few categories of combustion units and incinerators. Together, these sources emit more than 155 tons of mercury into our environment each year. These emissions can be suspended in the air for up to a year and travel hundreds of miles before settling in bodies of water and soil.

Nearly every State confronts the health risks posed by mercury pollution and the problem is growing. Just 6 years ago, 27 States had issued mercury advisories warning the public about consuming freshwater fish contaminated with mercury. Today, the number of States issuing advisories has risen to 40, and the number of water bodies covered by the warnings has nearly doubled.

In some States, including the State of Maine, every single river, lake, and stream is under a mercury advisory, and that applies to the States shown in black on this chart.

The growing problem has already prompted action at the State and regional level. Last year, the New England governors and Eastern Canadians premiers enacted a plan to reduce emissions, educate the public, and label mercury. Maine and Vermont have passed legislation to cut mercury pollution, and Massachusetts and New Jersey have enacted strict mercury emission standards on waste incinerators.

Although there is a clear consensus that mercury pollution poses a significant threat, State and regional initiatives alone are not sufficient to deal with this problem. As Congress recognized when it passed the Clean Air Act, the only effective way to deal with airborne pollutants that know no State boundaries. That is why I am introducing legislation to reduce the amount of mercury emitted from the largest polluters. This bill sets mercury emission standards for coal-fired utilities, cement plants, and Portland cement plants. According to the EPA's report to Congress, these sources are responsible for more than 87 percent of all mercury emissions waste the U.S.

My bill also phases out the use of mercury in products and ensures that municipalities work with waste incinerators that keep products that contain mercury out of the waste stream. It would also require a recycling program for products that contain mercury as an essential component and increases research into the effects of mercury pollution.

With mercury levels in the environment growing every year, it is long past time to enact a comprehensive strategy for controlling mercury pollution. We have the technology for companies to meet these standards, and this bill will allow them to choose the best approach for their facility.

We have reduced or eliminated other toxins without the catastrophic effects that some industries predicted. Now we should eliminate dangerous levels of mercury. I urge my colleagues to support this legislation and stop mercury from polluting our waters, infecting our fish and wildlife, and threatening the health of our children.

### A SOURING DEBATE OVER MILK PRICES

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Mr. Speaker, in the last couple of days our colleague, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. GREEN) and myself have sent to all of our other colleagues a copy of an editorial which appeared recently in the Kansas City Star.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to read some excerpts of that editorial because as far as I am concerned they got the debate exactly right. I read and I quote, in 1996, Congress ordered the administration to simplify the pricing of milk. That is easy enough. Stop regulating it. But this is the farm sector and a free market in milk is somehow inconceivable. Instead, milk prices are calculated from rules and equations contained in volumes of the Code of Federal Regulations. The administration's proposed reform would reduce the number of regions for which the price of wholesale