

Air pollution control agreement a winner for Illinois

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A tentative agreement last week between Ameren Corp. and the state of Illinois heralds a new – and welcome – era of cooperation on air pollution control in Illinois.

The agreement, which still needs to be approved by the Illinois Pollution Control Board and the state Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, would significantly cut sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and mercury emissions from the six coal-fired power plants Ameren operates in Illinois. If successful – and Ameren contends its "multi-pollutant control strategy" will be – the utility's power plant emissions would surpass federal standards and prove that utilities can meet more stringent requirements.

Ameren said the improved technologies would cost the utility about \$2 billion. The cost to Illinois consumers is unclear. No one knows where we will get our power from next year – or where the electricity that Ameren produces will go – until a state power production agreement goes into effect on Jan. 2. But the Illinois EPA estimated that the pollution control improvements would cost no more than \$1.25 a month for Ameren's downstate customers, including nearly everyone living in East Central Illinois.

That may be a burden to some consumers – although not nearly as much as the unrelated rate hikes expected in January – but the agreement benefits the state in many ways. It means cleaner air in Illinois with less smog and less mercury in lakes and streams. It means retaining and modernizing Ameren power plants that provide jobs and tax revenue for several Illinois communities, including nearby Crawford and Jasper counties, where the Hutsonville and Newton plants are located. And it includes the hope that more Illinois coal (which has a lower mercury content than western coal) can be burned in the improved power plants.

The hallmark of the agreement is the reduction in mercury, a dangerous pollutant that can cause brain and neurological damage, especially in young children, women of childbearing age and pregnant women. The agreement would reduce mercury pollution at most Ameren plants by 90 percent by 2009, a significant improvement over the 70 percent target mandated by the federal government. All Ameren plants would have to meet the 90 percent goal by 2015. Sulfur dioxide emissions would be cut by 76 percent and nitrogen oxide emissions would be reduced by 55 percent by 2015.

There had been some concern that more demanding pollution control requirements on Illinois plants would put the state's utilities and power plants at a disadvantage with other Midwest producers. But Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan in the Midwest, as well as a host of other states, also are proposing tougher mercury pollution limits. And the

Vermilion Power Station, northwest of Danville and operated by Houston-based Dynegy Midwest Generation, will have new pollution controls in operation by next June that will cut mercury emissions by 90 percent.

Improvements in technologies have made significant, cost-effective reductions in air pollution feasible. That's good for the health of Illinoisans (as well as those downwind), for the Illinois economy and for the future of the Illinois coal industry.