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Editorial

A victory for clean air

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Earlier this year, Gov. Rod Blagojevich proposed some of the toughest mercury pollution controls for utilities in the nation. He promised faster, sharper reductions than the federal government's plan. He did so, he said, in response to a frightening Tribune series on mercury contamination in fish.

Last week, Blagojevich delivered in a big way: Ameren, one of Illinois' largest utilities, agreed to dramatically cut smog, soot and mercury pollution from its coal-fired power plants.

What's more impressive is that Ameren pledged to cut emissions at its Downstate coal plants far more than federal rules require, and faster. That means less pollution billowing toward the Chicago area, less pollution to slash years off lives and contribute to lung damage, heart disease and respiratory ailments. Less mercury in the air means less of the toxic metal falling into lakes and streams, where it can build up to the point that children and pregnant women are warned to avoid eating certain fish.

Bravo, Governor. And bravo, Ameren.

This did involve a compromise. Blagojevich had proposed that Illinois coal plants reduce average mercury emissions by 90 percent by 2009. Under the administration's deal with Ameren, the utility will install mercury controls on most of its generating units by 2009. It won't be required to meet the 90 percent target until 2015, though the utility and state said the goal probably will be reached much earlier. That's still better than the federal rules, which give utilities nationwide until at least 2018 to curb overall mercury emissions by about 70 percent.

The Chicago area has been identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a mercury "hot spot," where relatively large amounts of mercury fall back to earth. Agency scientists found that nearly two-thirds of the mercury that falls on Chicago comes from sources inside Illinois.

There's an important example here for other Illinois operators of aging power plants. Like many other utilities, Ameren officials said they had been concerned that they could not meet the governor's proposed deadline for mercury. But they also were aware of other clear air requirements, for smog and soot pollution, in addition to mercury. So they decided to tackle all the problems at once.

That makes sense, both for business and for the environment. Ameren is showing the way. Now, for the rest of the industry .