

Published: February 22, 2006

**Editorial**

## **Illinois right to pursue tougher rules for mercury**

You love to go fishing, especially for catfish on the Rock River. You catch a nice 29-inch flathead that you take home, skin and make a meal for you and your family. If you want to keep fishing, don't make a habit of eating what you catch.

That's because fish that swim in Illinois waters have too much mercury in them and, if you consume too much mercury, you are at greater risk of heart attacks, brain damage, respiratory problems and other illnesses.

The problem will not go away easily or quickly, but an aggressive plan to reduce mercury emissions from Illinois' coal-fired power plants is a good start.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich has proposed reducing mercury emissions 90 percent by 2009. That's much more stringent than federal standards that seek a 21 percent reduction by 2010 and a 70 percent cut by 2018.

Illinois needs to be more aggressive because the problem is greater here. Illinois ranks sixth in the nation for mercury emissions.

Mercury is an odorless chemical that naturally occurs in the environment, but the problem is mercury introduced by coal-fired power plants, the largest U.S. source of mercury in our environment. Mercury is released into the air and then falls into water or, when it falls onto land, it makes its way into water. When mercury gets into water, bacteria change it into methylmercury. Methylmercury is absorbed by aquatic organisms. Those organisms are eaten by small fish, which are eaten by bigger fish, which are eaten by humans.

Former Rockford Mayor Doug Scott, in his first visit to the Editorial Board since becoming chief of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, said Monday that technology has improved enough that Illinois' coal plants can meet the emissions standards inexpensively.

The Illinois Energy Association recognizes the health risks associated with mercury, but disagrees with Scott that the technology is available to reach Illinois' standards. The association is committed to living up to federal regulations.

But a look at Massachusetts supports Scott's contention. In 2002, state regulators there concluded that the technology existed to reduce emissions by 90 percent. Tough mercury

regulations were approved two years later. Beginning in 2008, power plants would have to reduce emissions by 85 percent, and by 2012 that would increase to 95 percent. Also, an Ohio company recently announced pollution control technology that reduces mercury emissions up to 98 percent.

Max Muller, environmental advocate for Illinois Public Interest Research Group, a nonprofit organization that includes protecting the environment in its mission statement, joined Scott at the meeting with the Editorial Board. Muller said the technology for meeting the requirements is simple, easy to retrofit and would cost about \$1 million a plant, a reasonable price tag to protect the public's health.

Coal industry advocates say those costs will be passed on to consumers. Muller says that would amount to only 69 cents on the average bill.

Scott said a byproduct of the mercury-emissions plan is that it will help Illinois coal interests. It's easier to take mercury out of coal that comes from Illinois than coal from the Western states. The new regulations would be an incentive for power plants in Illinois — and other Midwestern states that are considering similar restrictions — to burn Illinois coal.

In northern Illinois, where only 20 percent of energy comes from coal, concerns about the coal industry are not as great, but the potential health benefits of the governor's proposal affect us all.

This is an idea that makes economic and environmental sense and should be implemented.