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Editorial

Deal with utility to reduce pollution good news for state

Doug Scott has a good reason to be pleased these days.

The director of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and former Rockford mayor recently helped the state reach an agreement with one of Illinois' largest utilities, Ameren, to reduce smog, soot and mercury pollution from its coal-fired power plants. The energy company's decision to work with state officials is a victory for clean air and water in Illinois.

Mercury, in particular, is a problem. Illinois ranks sixth in the nation for mercury emissions. If you consume too much mercury, usually by eating fish, you are at greater risk of heart attacks, brain damage, respiratory problems and other illnesses. Children are more susceptible to the health problems than adults.

Mercury is an odorless chemical that naturally occurs in the environment, but the problem is mercury introduced by coal-fired power plants, which generate 46 percent of the electricity in Illinois. 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.

In February, we supported Gov. Rod Blagojevich's proposal to reduce mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants 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.

Ameren's deal with the state will be that it installs mercury controls on 94 percent of its generating units by 2009 and reaches the 90 percent emissions target in 2015.

"We think the timetable is just as aggressive because they have to install all the equipment by '09 and our technical guys think they'll get to the emissions level sooner than 2015," Scott said. "We get out of it what we wanted, plus the reduction in other pollutants."

Scott said he thinks other energy companies will follow Ameren's lead. Ameren, Dynegy and Midwest Generation provide 90 percent of the state's energy. Scott said he is cautiously optimistic that Dynegy and Midwest Generation will agree to reduce their mercury emissions.

Scott said the governor directed state officials to reach out to companies in March to see if there were some alternatives to the governor's proposal, including reducing other pollutants.

“The big thing is that these will be real reductions,” Scott said. “They won’t be allowed to trade, to buy credit from other companies.”

Federal rules allow utilities to trade the right to pollute as long as overall emissions decline.

In northern Illinois, 20 percent of energy comes from coal, so the direct emissions from coal-fired plants are not as great a concern as in downstate communities. But mercury finds its way into our waters, particularly the Rock River, putting many of us at risk of mercury poisoning.

The work of the governor, Scott, other state officials and representatives from Ameren will reap health benefits for every Illinoisan.