



Our Opinion

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Cut mercury emissions now

WE'RE ALL familiar with the pastoral scene of a dad and his son or daughter, casting their lines into their favorite pond, hoping to haul out a tasty bounty for a fish fry.

There's some truth to that cliché setting. Plenty of people still head to their favorite fishing holes in Illinois, but the informed anglers are careful about eating what they catch.

That's because every body of water in Illinois - from mighty Lake Michigan to the smallest farm pond - carries a fish advisory due to mercury contamination.

"It's sad that it's really no longer safe for people to eat much fish from Illinois lakes and rivers," said Howard Lerner, executive director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center.

IT IS SAD. It is also time to take action to reduce mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants in Illinois.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich released a plan earlier this year that would mandate coal-fired power plants in Illinois to achieve a 90 percent reduction in mercury emissions by July 2009. That would mean the 7,022 pounds of mercury spewed into the environment by coal-fired power plants in 2002 would be reduced to just 702 pounds by mid-2009.

Blagojevich's proposed rules have been drafted by the state Environmental Protection Agency and will go before the Illinois Pollution Control Board for hearings next month. Eventually, any change in the mercury-emission rules will receive final review by a legislative committee - the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules.

WE KNOW there will be great pressure brought by the utilities not to adopt these rules. Arguments will be made that such regulation is too costly, and it should be the responsibility of the federal government - not the state.

Yet, we know what the federal government intends to do. And it is not enough. The rules put in place by President Bush would reduce emissions of mercury by only 47 percent by 2010, and it would be another eight years before the rules' full 70 percent reduction took effect in 2018.

Technology exists that will allow for Blagojevich's 90 percent reduction standard. A process known as activated carbon injection can be used at most coal-fired plants to meet these high standards, and additional filtering processes are also available to reduce mercury emissions.

Implementing the rules will not come without a cost. An analysis by the state EPA indicates it will cost about \$2 million per power plant, and this could add a little more than a dollar per month to the average residential electric bill.

WE BELIEVE it would be far more costly not to implement Gov. Blagojevich's proposed rules. Mercury is a serious neurotoxin capable of doing serious and permanent damage to a developing fetus' brain as the heavy metal is passed along through the mother's placenta. This poison can also have serious debilitating neurological effects in growing children.

Illinois can't do anything about emissions from other states, or even other countries. Reducing mercury emissions here is not a perfect solution, but it is a big step - and the right thing to do. Much of the mercury emitted in Illinois falls to the ground in Illinois. That is why the state ranks fourth in the nation for mercury hot spots - areas of concentrated mercury pollution.

The dangers of mercury pollution are real. The technology is available to clean it up. The costs are not exorbitant. Some argue that nothing is forcing Illinois to be a leader in this area. We argue the health of our children should be force enough.