



Editorial / Commentary

Falling mercury

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Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich proposed some of the nation's toughest emission rules for mercury in January. Last week, he signed a deal with one of the state's largest utilities to cut the amount of mercury, soot and other pollutants discharged by coal fired power plants.

The deal gives Mr. Blagojevich more than he wanted, but not as quickly as he wanted it. Still, it represents a breakthrough that will benefit Illinois residents and pave the way for similar agreements with other utilities.

Mercury is a toxic heavy metal. Coal-fired power plants are the largest U.S. source of mercury. The metal builds up in fish, and in the bodies of people who eat them. It can cause serious birth defects. Once released, it stays in the environment forever.

The governor's original plan called for mercury emissions to drop 90 percent by 2009. The new agreement gives energy generating giant Ameren until 2015 to meet that standard. But it will have to install pollution controls on its largest plants by 2009, and will likely meet the standard sooner at all but a handful of small plants that generate about 6 percent of its electricity. The company will spend about \$1.6 billion to upgrade its coal-fired power plants.

What's more, the utility agreed to cut sulfur dioxide emissions by 76 percent, and nitrogen oxide emissions 55 percent, by 2015. All three reductions are greater than what the federal government would require over the same period.

When Mr. Blagojevich's original proposal was unveiled, all of the state's utilities claimed the reductions were not possible and the health effects of cutting mercury emissions would be insignificant. Both were specious arguments that have become increasingly untenable as the rule-making process moved forward.

Utilities had been fighting the new standards in the General Assembly and before the state Pollution Control Board. But the board recently rejected a utility company effort to throw out testimony from scientists who detailed studies showing that mercury falls to earth close to the smoke stacks that emit it.

Even with that testimony in place, the utilities were in position to delay the new standards with costly legal challenges. Mr. Blagojevich was wise to circumvent that with his compromise, which will also help reduce the state's smog problem.

The agreement with Ameren will surely increase pressure on Dynegy and Midwest Generation, two other large power generators also operating in Illinois. Representatives of both companies told the Chicago Tribune that they're also conducting talks on the rules.

Mr. Blagojevich deserves great credit for reaching the compromise. Ameren also deserves credit for recognizing that change is in the wind.

The future for coal-fired power plants will have to be much cleaner.