



Get mercury out of state smokestacks

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Last January, Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced his intentions to get power companies to slash mercury emissions. Now a formal plan has unanimously cleared the Pollution Control Board. It deserves a legislative panel's serious consideration.

Mercury is a nasty by-product of coal-fired smokestacks. Once it gets in water, there's no easy way to clean it up. The key is keeping it out. To that end Illinois will offer a choice to power companies. Option 1 would have a generator cut mercury emissions by 90 percent by 2009. Option 2 would grant more time if a generator reduces two other pollutants.

There are several reasons for the Legislature's joint rules committee to approve the plan. First, two major power companies are on board. Ameren Corp. has signed on to the second option, as has Dynegy. That leaves Midwest Generation, owner of Pekin's Powerton plant. The plan enjoys broad support from the medical community.

Second, Illinois is one of America's mercury hot spots, according to the Environmental Law and Policy Center. Some three tons are released every year. Since most of those heavy-metal emissions settle within 30 miles of their source, what's spewed here largely stays here. Every major state river and lake already bears a fishing advisory for mercury.

Finally, Illinois is on a deadline. It's among a dozen states seeking to create stiffer rules than those set by the Bush administration, and environmental regulators still need to review the state's goals. Bush's approach lets power companies trade pollution credits across state lines, which might work in areas with few coal plants. But Illinois is coal country, with 60 major coal-fired units; only Indiana comes close.

Lawmakers could be forgiven for weighing cost concerns at a time when electricity rate hikes loom. The governor's budget office has said that reducing emissions could cost \$2 million per smokestack. Ameren says it will spend \$2 billion to upgrade equipment at six Illinois generation facilities - up to \$1.4 billion to comply with federal clean-air regulations, and another \$600 million to honor its agreement with the state. Those capital costs will be passed to consumers, though the Citizens Utility Board claims the pinch will be minimal, about \$1 per month.

All told, it seems unwise for Illinois to miss this window to take some action to curb mercury emissions, the evils of which are gaining increasing health attention, especially for women.