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Let's Protect Our Children By Reducing Mercury Pollution From Coal Plants

By HOWARD A. LEARNER

Illinois ranks 4th in the nation for local "hot spots" of concentrated mercury pollution. Pollution from nearby coal plants is poisoning the Great Lakes and Illinois' rivers and lakes and is threatening the health of children born to women who consume mercury-contaminated fish.

It's time for Illinois to take action to address this leading local cause of mercury pollution.

Governor Blagojevich has announced a plan by which Illinois would join other states in stepping up, where the federal government has not, to adopt standards requiring owners of coal plants to install modern pollution control technologies that will reduce their mercury pollution by 90% or more by 2009.

This plan warrants strong public support. Likewise, the out-of-state energy companies that own most of the coal plants in Illinois should be responsible corporate citizens by supporting and implementing this mercury pollution clean-up plan, rather than spending their money on lobbyists and lawyers to undermine it.

We know what the health problems are. Mercury is a neurotoxin. It can pass through a pregnant women's placenta and cause harm to fetal brain development.

We know that coal plants are the single largest source of mercury pollution, which gets into lakes, rivers and streams and proceeds up the food chain into fish.

The Illinois Department of Public Health have issued "fish advisories" warning everyone -- especially pregnant women and women of childbearing years -- to severely limit their consumption of fish from Illinois' rivers, inland lakes and Lake Michigan.

Sad, isn't it? Fish we catch in Illinois' rivers and lakes are

not safe to eat.

We know that modern pollution control equipment can eliminate most of the mercury pollution from the coal plants. This technology is available and affordable to achieve a 90% reduction in mercury pollution from coal plants.

We also know that the type of coal mined in Central and Southern Illinois generally produces less mercury when burned than does Wyoming coal, which the energy companies have mostly switched to use in their coal plants here. Accordingly, Illinois' coal economy would benefit from tighter mercury pollution standards.

How bad is the problem? Estimates are that 6%-10% of women in their child-bearing years have a mercury level high enough to put a fetus at an increased risk for developmental problems, which can burden a child throughout life by limiting opportunities. This also creates extra costs for the health care and education systems.

A recent study by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine concluded that the U.S. could lose \$8.7 billion annually in unrealized earnings due to reductions in intelligence from mercury pollution – far greater than the costs of reducing mercury pollution at the source.

The Bush Administration's weak so-called "Clean Air Mercury Rule" does not protect us soon enough or strongly enough from the health impacts of mercury pollution. Nevertheless, it does explicitly allow states to implement stronger mercury reduction standards in two ways.

First, Illinois can require stronger mercury pollution controls for coal plants within its borders. Second, Illinois can prohibit out-of-state credit trading by coal plant owners, which would otherwise do little to alleviate local mercury hot spots.

What we need now is leadership for policy actions requiring coal plants to be cleaned up and reduce pollution in order to protect our children's health and our environment.

Governor Blagojevich's plan will make Illinois a national leader in curbing mercury pollution by requiring coal plants to install readily available and affordable technology. Combined with measures under way, it will go a long way toward reducing mercury in the Great Lakes and our inland waterways. It will help lower the mercury exposure for more than 100,000 women of childbearing ages in Illinois.

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Illinois Pollution Control Board are now considering adoption of this plan. They should seize this opportunity to promptly adopt stronger, more effective state mercury pollution standards to protect our children's health and quality of life. The costs of inaction – to Illinois' children, their families and our state's economy – are far too great. Let's move forward and



help solve this tragic mercury pollution problem.

By investing now to reduce mercury pollution from coal plants, we can protect the health of future Illinoisans and reduce the costs of mercury exposure that otherwise will burden people's lives, our environment, and the state's economy for years to come.

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