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Voice of the People

A Chicago Tribune Web log for letters to the editor

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Mercury pollution

As medical and public health professionals dedicated to improving the well-being of all Illinoisans, we were disappointed to read the recent letter from Illinois Chamber of Commerce President Douglas Whitley regarding the state's plan to reduce mercury pollution that threatens our children's health and the environment ("Mercury proposal fails cost/benefit test," Commentary, June 12).

The electric power generation industry needs to accept responsibility for its impact on public health, particularly on children. The effects of mercury pollution from coal plants are especially tragic. So as the Illinois Pollution Control Board considers the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's plan to require coal plants to reduce their mercury pollution by 90 percent by June 2009, remember these facts:

- Methylmercury is a potent neurotoxin that can cause irreversible damage to developing children when they or their mothers eat contaminated fish.
- Coal plants produce 60 percent of the mercury pollution in Illinois.
- Local mercury pollution matters. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency scientists found that in the Chicago area—one of the nation's worst mercury hot spots—nearly two-thirds of the mercury in the waterways came from Illinois sources.
- Illinois is one of more than a dozen states taking action to reduce mercury pollution from coal plants within their borders. These states aren't attempting to "impose burdens" on industry, as Whitley writes. They are stepping up to enact strong state-based mercury pollution control standards because the Bush administration's so-called federal Clean Air Mercury Rule is, as Congressman Mark Kirk said, "too little, too late" and falls short in protecting children's health and our environment.
- The U.S. EPA's own Inspector General concluded the federal mercury rule was drafted in a manner that failed to evaluate the full effects of mercury pollution on children and women of childbearing age. At best, the federal rule will reduce mercury pollution by only 47 percent by 2010.
- Modern mercury pollution control technology is well tested and already in use in other states. Activated carbon injection technologies have achieved 90 percent reductions in mercury pollution in waste incinerators for more than a decade.
- Numerous studies directly link reductions in mercury pollution to lower mercury levels in species of fish that people eat. Since mercury pollution controls were implemented in South Florida waste incinerators in the early 1990s, mercury concentrations in largemouth bass in the Everglades have dropped by 80 percent.

The Chicago Tribune recently reported that airborne mercury levels in Illinois increased by 28 percent between 1999 and 2002 as power plants burned more coal to meet the demand for electricity. Clearly, we must do something now.

The energy companies that own the coal plants in Illinois can and should install available modern pollution control technologies that reduce mercury pollution from coal plants by at least 90 percent. We can meet electricity needs in ways that protect public health and the environment.

The Illinois plan to reduce mercury pollution will protect our children and reduce the costs of mercury exposure that will otherwise burden children and families' lives and our state's economy for years to come. It's time for the coal plant industry to support it.

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