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Baby Buggy Brigade Rallies for Children's Health
First Mom Patti Blagojevich and other public leaders join Illinois mothers in urging adoption of the Illinois power plant mercury rule

Chicago, IL—First Lady Patti Blagojevich, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Director Doug Scott and State Representative Karen May joined Chicago mothers, children, doctors, and health and environmental groups today to call for passage of the pending state rule to reduce mercury emissions from coal fired power plants. Environment Illinois, Illinois Sierra Club, and the Environmental Law and Policy Center were among the groups present to kick off Mother's Day week with the rally in support of the Illinois rule because it will protect Illinois children from highly toxic mercury pollution.

"Mercury is such a potent poison that even trace amounts can permanently damage a child's brain or nervous system," said First Lady Patti Blagojevich, "I love fish, but when I was pregnant, I avoided eating fish high in mercury because the health risks for children are just too great. Illinois needs its mercury rule because Illinois mothers need to know that our environment is a healthy place to raise our kids. I'm proud that the state is taking the lead in providing that peace of mind."

[Thirty mothers?] with children in tow attended the event, billed as a "baby buggy brigade," in support of Governor Rod Blagojevich's proposed administrative rule, which would eliminate 90 percent of mercury emissions from in-state coal-fired power plants by 2009. The twenty-one coal-fired power plants in Illinois are the largest source of in-state mercury emissions, emitting over 7000 pounds annually, more than all other human sources combined. Illinois EPA economic modeling indicates that available technologies can capture 90 percent of this mercury with an increased cost to the average ratepayer of less than \$1.50 per month.

"Illinois is making real progress in eliminating this dangerous toxin from our environment, but there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done," said state Representative Karen May (D-Highland Park), who introduced and passed legislation making Illinois a national leader in removing mercury from end-of-life vehicles. "Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that causes brain damage in children and the largest source of mercury is from our coal-fired power plants, so what better time than around Mother's Day to turn out in support of our proposed mercury reduction rule."

The health harms of mercury are well known: mercury is a potent toxin especially dangerous to children and developing fetuses. Even low doses can cause developmental delays, decreased IQ, impaired motor functions, memory and attention difficulties, and deafness and blindness. In April 2004, U.S. EPA scientists estimated that up to one in six potential mothers in the U.S. has sufficiently high mercury blood levels to put an unborn child at risk of neurological damage. Higher doses cause similar problems in adults as well as fertility problems and elevated blood pressure and heart attack risk.

"Long term low-level mercury exposure is dangerous and not uncommon. The damage it causes to children's developing brains burdens our education systems. What is frequently lost in the debate about pollution controls is the large social cost of inaction. This was well described recently in Environmental Health Perspectives, the Journal of the Government's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences" said Dr. Peter Orris, Professor and Chief of Environmental and Occupational Medicine at the University of Illinois Medical Center. "We know that mercury pollution harms people, and if we don't pay to clean it up now, we'll end up paying a lot more later."

Humans get most of their mercury from eating fish—and mercury contaminates fish in every body of water in Illinois. A recent Illinois PIRG analysis showed that the average fish mercury concentration in 36 Illinois counties, 66 individual lakes and streams, and 16 fish species exceeds the U.S. EPA safe limit for a woman of average weight who eats fish twice per week.

"The American Heart Association (AHA) tells us to eat fish twice a week for the fatty acids, but Illinois families can't follow that advice with local fish, because if they do, they'll likely exceed the U.S. EPA safe dose of mercury," said Rebecca Stanfield, State Director of Environment Illinois, the new home of Illinois PIRG's environmental work "But studies suggest that if we can reduce that power plant mercury pollution locally, we can expect rapid decreases in fish mercury levels."

The mercury rule is now pending approval by the Illinois Pollution Control Board. At today's rally, speakers presented over 5000 letters and postcards to the Pollution Control Board in support of the rule. At the same time, children were hard at work on a giant Mother's Day card in favor of the rule for the Board.

"If we are serious about reducing mercury, targeting mercury pollution from coal plants is the obvious answer," said Howard Learner, Executive Director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center. "These plants cause over 70 percent of the problem statewide, and we can clean them up for less than the price of a cup of coffee per family per month."

"The Governor's mercury proposal will make Illinois a national leader in reducing mercury emissions from power plants. People in Illinois are now more educated than ever on the harmful health and environmental effects mercury emissions have and they expect results," said Illinois EPA Director Doug Scott, "But, this is not just an Illinois problem. This is a nationwide problem and I've spoken with my counterparts in other states about this issue and hopefully a major coal burning state like Illinois taking the lead to propose stricter standards will encourage other states to take similar measures."

The Illinois proposal is in response to a federal mercury rule that is currently being implemented and is widely regarded as insufficient. The federal rule includes emissions trading and banking provisions, which permit power plants to buy, trade, and save mercury emission credits instead of reducing emissions. The Congressional Research Service estimates that these features of the federal rule will prevent it from meeting its modest reduction targets until after 2030. In response to the federal rule more than a dozen states including the Great Lake states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania as well as Illinois, have proposed or already enacted their own, more protective mercury rules.

The rally took place outside of the Thompson Center state office building, the site of the Pollution Control Board, where, until this week, the board's first hearing on the mercury rule was scheduled to begin today. But on May first, the 7th circuit court of Sangamon ruled in favor of utility companies, who complained about the expedited rulemaking process for this rule, and has at least temporarily called off the hearings. The mercury rule was on a fast track rulemaking schedule to meet a November federal deadline for states to implement mercury rules. Illinois EPA has filed a motion to resume the hearings on an expedited schedule and they are likely to begin in early June.

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