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Public Interest Leaders Call On Topinka To Establish Position On Mercury Pollution Reduction Plan

Initiative Would Cut Mercury Pollution From Illinois Coal Plants By 90 Percent By 2009

CHICAGO — A group of Illinois' top children's advocates and environmental, public health and consumer rights organizations today called on Illinois Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka to support a state initiative to reduce mercury pollution from coal plants by 90 percent by June 30, 2009.

The organizations' members of a broad-based coalition supporting the mercury pollution reduction plan asked the Republican gubernatorial nominee to clearly articulate her position at a news conference at North Avenue Beach. The Illinois Pollution Control Board is scheduled to begin hearings on the plan next week.

"Protecting our children's health and environment from mercury pollution should not be a partisan issue," said Howard Learner, executive director of the Environmental Law & Policy Center.

"The plan before the Pollution Control Board will require Illinois coal plants to clean up and reduce mercury pollution by an average of 90 percent by June 30, 2009. Illinois should step up where the Bush Administration has not. We urge Treasurer Topinka to join us in supporting this important action to protect Illinois' children and environment," said Learner.

Learner was joined at the news conference by: Rebecca Stanfield, state director of Environment Illinois, the new home of Illinois PIRG's environmental program; Jack Darin, director, Sierra Club, Illinois Chapter; William McNary, co-executive director, Citizen Action; Jerry Stermer, president, Voices for Illinois Children; and Karen Yarbrough, senior policy associate, Ounce of Prevention Fund.

"Mercury poisoning robs children of their true potential in life," said Stermer. "There is no dispute on that fact. The recent studies and news reports simply underscore the need to take strong action at the state level now to reduce mercury pollution from coal plants in Illinois. All Illinois public officials need to get behind this plan."

"Cleaning up mercury from power plants is the most significant environmental policy being debated in Illinois today," said Stanfield. "The public needs to know where Treasurer Topinka stands, and we hope she recognizes what an important opportunity this is to protect public health in our state."

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As the mercury reduction plan makes its way through the state's environmental rule-making process, recent revelations suggest the mercury pollution problem in Illinois may be far worse than previously understood:

- Mercury pollution from coal plants is increasing steadily nationwide and at especially alarming rates in Illinois, the Chicago Tribune reported April 29. Between 1999 and 2002, airborne mercury levels in Illinois increased by a staggering 28 percent, the Tribune said.
- A recent analysis of government fish samples by Illinois PIRG found the average mercury concentration in Illinois sport fish is above the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recommended safe limit for women of average weight who eat fish twice a week. This report is available at www.EnvironmentIllinois.org.
- Although the U.S. EPA estimates that about 6 percent of women of childbearing age in the U.S. have blood mercury levels that exceed the federal recommended limit, a new study by the Sierra Club suggests that level could be as high as 1 in 4 women in the Chicago area.

"We don't need any more studies on this issue. We need action," McNary added. "Reducing mercury pollution from coal plants is a critical public health issue. Illinois voters have a right to know where Treasurer Topinka stands as they weigh their choice for governor."

A new federal mercury pollution standard will take effect in November and was crafted without fully accounting for the impact mercury pollution has on children's health. The new federal rule would reduce mercury pollution from coal plants by only 47 percent by 2010, compared to 90 percent by 2009 in the Illinois plan. The federal standard also allows coal plants to purchase the right to continue polluting at current levels, potentially perpetuating mercury hot spots in Illinois. Illinois ranks fourth nationally for most severe mercury hot spots and is among numerous states taking action to enact their own stronger mercury pollution reduction initiatives.

The Illinois Department of Public Health has issued "fish advisories" warning everyone—particularly pregnant women, women of childbearing age and children—to limit their consumption of fish from all Illinois lakes, rivers and streams.

"Eating fish can be part of a healthy diet for women, but unfortunately some fish are contaminated with mercury and pose a threat to moms and children," said Darin. "We're calling on Treasurer Topinka to get behind the strong state plan to reduce mercury from coal plants so our lakes, rivers and streams will be cleaner, and women in Illinois will once again be able to enjoy health benefits, not risks, from eating local fish."

The proposed mercury rule before the Illinois Pollution Control Board would make the state a national leader in reducing mercury pollution to protect children's health and our Great Lakes environment. Adopting stricter mercury pollution standards for coal plants will lower the mercury exposure of more than 100,000 women of childbearing age in Illinois whose blood mercury levels may exceed the federal recommended limit.

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