

**Champaign News-Gazette**  
**EDITORIAL**

**Blagojevich's switch welcome on tougher mercury pollution rules**

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Switching positions, Gov. Rod Blagojevich now says he favors strict controls on mercury emissions from Illinois power plants. Whatever his motivation, the governor's change is welcome.

One would hate to think that Gov. Rod Blagojevich was playing politics with something as important as public health and air pollution, but what other conclusion can be drawn from the governor's sudden, but welcome, flip-flop on cutting mercury emissions from Illinois power plants?

With great fanfare, Blagojevich announced last week that he supports a rule reducing mercury emissions from the state's 22 coal-fired power plants by an average of 90 percent by June 30, 2009. Mercury is a neurotoxin found in the air that then settles in lakes, rivers and streams, contaminating fish and the people who eat them. Mercury exposure can cause brain and neurological damage. That's why many states, including Illinois, warn consumers to limit their intake of fish.

Illinois, like some states that have already done so and several that are considering doing so, would have stricter regulations than those imposed by the federal government.

The Bush administration last year proposed the world's first pollution control regulations on mercury emissions. The federal rules called for cutting power plant emissions nationwide from 48 tons of mercury a year to 31.3 tons in 2010 and to 24.3 tons in 2020. While the regulations were groundbreaking, we said at the time that they weren't aggressive enough.

Although Illinois ranks fifth among the states in terms of mercury emissions, mercury is a worldwide problem. U.S. power plants, in fact, account for only about 2 percent of all mercury pollution. Thus, reducing or even eliminating mercury emissions in Illinois won't solve the problem. But studies by the U.S. EPA found that 41 percent of emissions from Illinois power plants fell within the state's borders. Eliminating that much mercury [-] the state EPA estimates total coal-fired power plant emissions at 3.5 tons every year [-] can only help to improve the health and safety of Illinoisans, as well as our neighbors. It might also persuade the federal government to opt for stricter controls.

Some utility companies argue that cutting mercury emissions by 90 percent is technologically difficult, might require closing some old power plants and would drive up the cost of electricity to consumers.

That can't-do attitude flies in the face of what's being done by electricity producers in New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut [-] and Illinois. PSEG Power, an East Coast utility, says it can cut mercury emissions at its entire fleet of power plants by 90 percent by July 2008. And Dynegy, which operates the 50-year-old Vermilion Power Station near Danville, says it will install equipment there that can cut mercury emissions by 90 percent by June 2007. As for costs, the National Wildlife Federation estimates that the typical residential customer would pay 69 cents a month, or a 1.1 percent increase, for the mercury emission controls. The state EPA estimates a cost of \$1.25 a month.

The only thing unsettling about Blagojevich's announcement last week is the timing. In September 2004, Blagojevich's Illinois EPA announced that it would not impose a tougher mercury emissions standard on the state's power plants. It called such a strategy "irresponsible," contending that the state would be better off "demanding that the federal government act nationally to reduce power plant emissions."

What was "irresponsible" in 2004 now is the right thing to do, according to Blagojevich. We hope his conversion is based on science and concerns for public health, not the Election Day 11 months from now.