

Mercury Limits

Illinois sets rules all Lakes states should copy

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Gov. Rod Blagojevich of Illinois has taken a bold step toward mercury control that other Great Lakes governors, including Michigan's Jennifer Granholm, can emulate -- and use for cover. If they all take shelter under this unexpectedly strong proposal, the benefits will be great.

The plan put forward last week by Blagojevich calls for coal-fired power plants to remove, on average, 90% of their mercury emissions by June 30, 2009. That's a direct rebuke to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which has a rule so weak that it cannot even guarantee its goal of a 70% reduction by 2018.

Blagojevich's plan is even more aggressive than others put forward to counter the EPA's failings, including one by the environmental wing of Granholm's mercury study group. A model rule offered by a group of state and local air pollution control officials has slightly tighter emissions controls but included a longer timetable.

By following in Illinois' footsteps, Great Lakes governors could make a huge difference quickly in the amount of mercury -- which occurs naturally in coal -- that drops out of the smoke from power plants and ultimately ends up in the water. The other advantage of working in unison is the common playing field it would create for the region's utility companies. In an era of deregulation, already uneven from state to state, competition can get skewed if some states clamp down on mercury and others don't.

Once deposited in water, mercury works its way up the food chain in toxic form and makes many fish, including some in the Great Lakes and virtually all species in inland waters, unsafe for anything but very occasional eating.

In the body, the toxic form of mercury hampers the brain and nervous system. The most extreme example accounts for the phrase "mad as a hatter," dating back to when a mercury solution was used in hat-making.

After years of breathing the vapors, hat-makers would show symptoms from trembling hands and slurred speech to memory loss and irrationality.

Today, the biggest exposure comes from fish. Most worrisome is damage done during pregnancy when mercury passes from mother to offspring, affecting development.

Freshwater fish should be a healthy choice for them, not a threat, and the states should seize this window of opportunity to make it happen.