



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER

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DOCTORS AND PUBLIC HEALTH LEADERS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS

December 22, 2005

The Honorable Rod Blagojevich
Office of the Governor
207 State House
Springfield, Illinois 62706

Dear Governor Blagojevich:

As medical and health professionals – and parents of Illinois children – we commend your leadership on the All Kids initiative as well as on autism, asthma and many other issues affecting the future of children in our state. We write today to urge you to continue your efforts on behalf of Illinois families by taking action to reduce mercury pollution, as well as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions responsible for ozone smog and fine particle pollution, from coal plants that harm public health and the environment. Measures to reduce this pollution are available to states under the federal Clean Air Mercury Rule and Clean Air Interstate Rule.

Mercury Pollution: Mercury pollution from coal plants has been linked to serious health problems, most notably neurological development of children. As Governor, you have a unique opportunity in 2006 to protect Illinoisans, especially our children, from the threats of mercury by initiating state action to:

- Adopt strong pollution control standards to reduce mercury pollution from Illinois coal plants by 90 percent or more by 2009. Modern pollution control technology to reduce mercury emissions is available, affordable and already being used on coal plants in other states. This action will better protect the health of future Illinoisans by reducing mercury pollution coming from coal plants much more than the weak federal rule would do.
- Prohibit out-of-state trading of mercury pollution credits that can result in the continuation of dangerous mercury “hot spots” in Illinois communities.

These two measures are available to states under the Bush Administration’s new “Clean Air Mercury Rule” governing mercury pollution, which takes effect in Fall 2006. Unfortunately, the new federal rule, by itself, does not provide an adequate level of protection from the immediate and long-term health effects of mercury exposure. The rule calls upon states with many coal plants emitting mercury – like Illinois – to implement standards providing needed protection from mercury pollution.

The most common route of exposure to methylmercury – the most toxic form of mercury – is through consumption of contaminated fish. Developing fetuses are exposed in utero when the mother consumes contaminated fish either prior to or during pregnancy. Infants and children can be exposed by drinking breast milk or by eating contaminated fish themselves. Research has found that exposure to mercury in the early stages of human development can impact thinking, memory, attention, language, and fine motor and visual spatial skills. The brain's control over pulmonary function can also be damaged, leading to an inadequate supply of oxygen to the body. Research suggests these impairments are permanent.

At the same time, researchers also have found an association between fish consumption and high infant cognition, making it desirable for pregnant women to eat fish, provided they are not contaminated. The solution lies not in restricting women's diets, but in reducing mercury pollution.

The devastating effects of mercury led the Illinois Department of Public Health to issue "fish advisories" warning the public, especially pregnant women, women of childbearing years and young children to limit their consumption of fish from Lake Michigan and all Illinois' inland waterways. All together, these warnings cover 52 bodies of water throughout the state, many within close proximity of coal plants.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Centers for Disease Control estimate that approximately 6% of women of childbearing age have blood mercury levels that pose appreciable risks to their developing fetuses. This percentage translates to 230,000 babies born annually in the United States with an increased risk of learning disabilities and other cognitive problems. These figures may underestimate the risk. New research indicates that mercury from the mother is concentrated in the fetus. According to estimates based on this research, 10% of U.S. women of childbearing age have mercury levels that place a fetus at risk, impacting approximately 410,000 births each year. The profound, ongoing damage caused by mercury exposure will burden Illinois families, as well as the state's health care and education systems, for years to come.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's own Inspector General has critiqued the Bush Administration's new rule for being developed without fully assessing the impact on children's health. Furthermore, the rule's "cap-and-trade" program could create and perpetuate mercury "hot spots" in Illinois if coal plants are allowed to purchase the right to keep polluting at high levels, rather than install mercury pollution controls to clean up their plants.

Despite its shortcomings, the rule gives states an opportunity to address localized mercury pollution problems by adopting stricter standards and opting out of the national cap-and-trade program. Stricter controls on mercury pollution from coal plants will benefit Illinois residents because mercury settles locally. According to the Environmental Protection Agency's own modeling, 63 percent of mercury deposition at one Chicago location came from Illinois sources, and 41 percent of all Illinois mercury pollution likely falls within the state's borders.

Sulfur Dioxide, Nitrogen Oxides, Ozone and Fine Particle Pollution: Air pollution from coal plants has also been linked to serious health problems, ranging from asthma attacks to premature deaths. As Governor, you have a unique opportunity in 2006 to protect vulnerable Illinoisans from the twin threats of ozone and fine particle pollution by initiating state action to:

- Adopt stricter declining caps on allowable nitrogen oxides pollution from Illinois coal plants than those in inadequate federal government rules.
- Propose stricter sulfur dioxide pollution limits that ensure all coal plants in Illinois meet minimally acceptable emission rates that decline over time.

These measures are allowable under the Bush Administration's new "Clean Air Interstate Rule", which goes into effect in Fall 2006. The rule, by itself, does not provide an adequate level of protection from the health effects of air pollution in Illinois.

More than 8 million Illinoisans currently live in areas where air quality does not meet minimal federal health standards for ozone smog and fine particle pollution. Simply breathing this air can cause health consequences ranging from asthma and heart attacks to, in far too many cases, premature death. Air pollution from coal plants is a main cause of the poor air quality most Illinois residents breathe everyday.

Sulfur dioxide is a direct respiratory irritant and is a major source of fine particle pollution formation, while nitrogen oxides lead to the formation of both ground-level ozone smog and fine particle pollution. Particulate matter has been linked to aggravated asthma, increased numbers of heart attacks and more premature deaths. Ozone is a respiratory irritant that triggers asthma attacks, increases emergency room visits and respiratory hospitalizations, and has also recently been linked to increased number of premature deaths. Research has found an association between these pollutants and premature delivery, as well as low birth weight. Together, these pollutants account for a significant portion of the negative health effects of coal plant pollution.

Without significant sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides pollution reductions from Illinois coal plants beyond the minimal federal reductions, Illinois will not meet clean air standards. Under the federal rule, more than 8 million state residents will still be breathing unhealthy air beyond 2015.

Recent studies indicate air pollution from coal plants, alone, is linked to 1,700 premature deaths and 33,000 extra asthma attacks annually in Illinois. Asthma is already the leading cause of school absences due to a chronic medical condition. Alarming, recent information shows that as many as one in four children in some inner-city Chicago neighborhoods have asthma. These are the children who will miss school and be at risk of falling even further behind academically. Families bear the dual burdens of stress from coping with the disease and the loss of loved ones, while already overburdened emergency rooms strain to care for patients on high air pollution days. Hospitals and the state often absorb the cost of this care when patients cannot afford to pay.

We urge you to take all necessary actions for Illinois to adopt stronger measures to reduce mercury, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides pollution from coal plants in our state. The

technology is available and affordable. Taking a stand against pollution from coal plants will protect all of your constituents, particularly our children, from the harmful effects of air pollution and reduce the strain on our state's families, health care system and education system.

Sincerely,

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