



## Plan to cut mercury worth considering

Monday, January 16, 2006

Gov. Rod Blagojevich recently singled out mercury as public health enemy No. 1 after reading the Chicago Tribune's series on tainted tuna. We wish he would have checked out this paper's lead poisoning series, but hey, Peoria sits a ways downriver.

That said, mercury is a terrible toxin, as neurologically damaging as lead, especially for infants. To reduce its presence in water, one must confront the primary U.S. source: coal-fired power plants.

The governor has introduced a proposal mandating that plants dramatically reduce mercury emissions. Whether it will fly in its current incarnation remains to be seen, as there are some sticking points. It is worthy of consideration.

Blagojevich's plan would supersede federal efforts. Every coal-fired plant in Illinois would have to slash emissions 90 percent by the end of 2012. The Environmental Protection Agency, on the other hand, mandates a 70 percent reduction by 2018. Blagojevich also is urging plants to install mercury-cleansing technology. The EPA is allowing plants to delay technology upgrades, instead letting them buy and swap pollution "credits." The governor's proposal definitely offers more immediacy.

Enter reality. While mercury is nasty and its industrial producers concede as much, Midwest Generation spokesman Doug McFarlan says that the process for cleaning Western coal - favored by plants for its low sulfur - isn't far enough along to meet Illinois' deadlines. His company owns Pekin's Powerton facility, which in 2003 emitted 561 pounds of mercury compounds.

In addition, installing new technology costs about \$2 million for each power unit, which utilities will pass on to consumers through electricity rate hikes. AmerenCILCO and ComEd are angling for rate increases now, even before these mercury regulations would kick in.

Another reality check: The mercury crackdown comes at a crossroads for the coal industry. Blagojevich is pushing Illinois power plants to burn more Illinois coal, which is low in mercury but high in sulfur - a cause of acid rain. If companies were to switch, they'd still have to install sulfur scrubbers, which is no small burden.

Finally, unlike lead paint in homes, mercury isn't limited by geography. The EPA says emissions can travel hundreds of miles. So even if Illinois joins Minnesota and Wisconsin in targeting mercury, it still has Missouri, Indiana and Kentucky to worry about. At a minimum, it would require a regional crackdown on mercury to really see results.

It's troubling that Illinois ranks sixth in the nation for mercury emissions, and that Pekin's Powerton plant leads the state. The plan should get sufficient airing during the state pollution board's hearings, and another once-over from the Legislature's rules committee. For now, the governor deserves credit for trying, and for reading a newspaper.

