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ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENT: Cutting down on mercury pollution

By Howard Learner, James Nelson, Jerry Stermer and Gail Wilson

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Illinois ranks fourth in the nation for localized hot spots of concentrated mercury pollution.

Pollution from coal plants throughout Illinois is contaminating our waterways and threatening the health of children born to women who consume mercury-contaminated fish.

We know what the health problems are. Mercury is a neurotoxin.

It can pass through a pregnant woman's placenta and cause harm to the brain development of the fetus. We know that coal plants are the largest source of mercury pollution, which gets into lakes, rivers and streams and proceeds up the food chain into fish.

How bad is the problem? Estimates are that 6 to 10 percent of women of childbearing age have mercury levels high enough to put a fetus at increased risk for developmental problems, which can burden a child throughout life.

This also creates extra costs for our health care and educational systems.

A plan announced recently by Gov. Rod Blagojevich and supported by many of the state's top doctors, hospitals, public health organizations and children's advocates would begin to reverse this terrible health problem by requiring coal plants to install modern technologies to reduce their mercury pollution by 90 percent or more by June 30, 2009.

Gov. Blagojevich's plan will make Illinois a national leader in curbing mercury pollution. Combined with measures underway in other midwestern states, it will go a long way toward reducing mercury in the Great Lakes and our inland waterways.

Moreover, it will help lower the mercury exposure of more than 100,000 women of childbearing age in Illinois. By investing now to reduce mercury pollution from coal plants, we can protect the health of future Illinoisans and reduce the costs of mercury exposure that otherwise will burden the state's economy for years to come.

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www.stopmercurypollution.org