

Chicago Sun-Times, Letters to the Editor, February 3, 2006

Clearing up mercury facts

I'm writing to set the record straight on your Jan. 25 editorial, "Dueling ideas for cutting mercury emissions," in which you commented: "The threat from Washington's slower approach [to reducing mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants] is not clear enough."

Allow me to clarify this threat. "Washington's slower approach" won't require power plants to install mercury controls for at least a decade, may not reach its meager reduction targets for another quarter century, and won't remedy local hotspots of mercury pollution -- such as the one we have right here in Chicago. If Gov. Blagojevich's 90 percent mercury reduction proposal fails, the Bush administration's plan will expose yet another generation of Illinois children to the harms of toxic mercury contamination, including learning disabilities, developmental delays, memory and attention problems, decreased IQ and mental retardation.

In your editorial, you fell for the red herring that "most of the mercury in the world comes from natural and non-U.S. sources." Scientists who study mercury cycling know that most natural mercury remains sequestered until human activity releases it, and that mercury's tendency to be deposited locally makes local emitters the greatest threat to public health.

Existing mercury controls are cheap and available. One recent study estimated that achieving the governor's proposed level of reduction would add just 69 cents to the average Illinois ratepayer's energy bill. And analyses of the cost of reducing mercury emissions must include the other side of the ledger: the enormous environmental, economic and public health costs to our society of under-regulated coal-fired mercury emissions.

Indeed, a 90 percent reduction in mercury is truly a low-hanging fruit among solutions to environmental and public health problems. I really do wish that the best choice was always this clear.

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