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FEATURED LETTER

No time to waste on mercury pollution

The Sun-Times seems to want to see evidence of many children with severe birth defects due to mercury poisoning before it will support Gov. Blagojevich's prevention plan to reduce mercury pollution from coal plants by at least 90 percent in order to protect children's health and our environment ("Dueling ideas for cutting mercury emissions," editorial, Jan. 25). But mercury poisoning doesn't work that way. It is an insidiously subtle condition that quietly robs children of their true potential by causing irreversible brain and neurological damage.

That's why more than 30 of the state's leading doctors, hospitals, public health organizations, children's advocates and environmental groups have joined together to support this plan to protect children and their families from the devastating health effects of mercury pollution from coal plants. Mercury is a neurotoxin that causes developmental disabilities. There is no medical dispute on this. Illinois needs to take smart

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preventative actions now.

The Bush administration's mercury reduction plan supported by the Sun-Times is too little, too late. Indeed, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's own inspector general concluded the new federal rule was crafted in a manner that failed to fully assess its impacts on children's health.

It's up to the states to now step up where the federal government has not. Illinois ranks fifth in the nation for most severe mercury hot spots. Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey have moved forward. Illinois should now join them. The governor's plan requires Illinois coal plants to reduce their mercury pollution by 90 percent by June 30, 2009. Modern pollution control technology is available and affordable to do so.

Because coal plants account for about 60 percent of mercury pollution and much of the mercury falls locally and regionally, the cumulative effects of mercury reductions in the Great Lakes region will be



Cans of tuna fish line a Des Plaines grocery store shelf last month. Data released by the Food and Drug Administration last month showed that 6 percent of the tested canned light tuna samples contained high levels of mercury. —TIM BOYLE/GETTY IMAGES

dramatic. Here in Illinois, reducing mercury pollution from coal plants will lower the exposure of more than 100,000 women of child-bearing age with blood mercury levels that could put their fetuses at risk for developmental problems.

But reducing mercury exposure is more than a simple moral imperative. A recent study by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine concluded the United States could lose \$8.7 billion annually in unrealized earnings due to reductions in intelligence from mercury pollution — far greater than the costs of reducing mercury pollution at the source.

Let's act now to protect children's and mothers' health and re-

duce the costs of mercury exposure that will otherwise burden our health care and educational systems for generations to come.

Dr. Eric Whitaker, director, Illinois Department of Public Health;
Jim Nelson, executive director, Illinois Public Health Association;
Laura Leon, acting executive director, Illinois Maternal and Child Health Coalition;
Jerry Stermer, president, Voices for Illinois Children;
Howard Learner, executive director, Environmental Law