

OPINION/EDITORIAL

A welcome breakthrough on mercury

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When it comes to mercury's presence in the environment, public-health implications strongly argue for efforts to achieve lower levels.

A persistent neurotoxin, mercury has a detrimental effect on humans, particularly on children, whose brains are not yet fully developed. Increasing levels of mercury in fish have been a growing source of concern in recent years, with levels for fish from some waters becoming so high that health experts have advised pregnant women and children to avoid consumption.

Because coal-fired power plants are a major source of mercury, public-policy debates have centered on the questions of how much their mercury emissions should be reduced and how soon.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich took an aggressive stand in January, proposing rules that would require coal-fired plants in Illinois to reduce mercury emissions by 90 percent by 2009.

The governor's rule is far more ambitious than a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rule issued in 2005 that requires coal-fired plants to cut emissions by 47 percent by 2010 and 79 percent by 2018.

While the federal rule clearly does not push power-plant owners hard enough, there seemed to be legitimate questions about whether the industry could meet Blagojevich's timetable.

But chalk one up for the governor and his administration: the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and Ameren, a large utility prominent downstate, this week announced an agreement in which the utility will come close to hitting the targets laid out by the governor.

Ameren will not achieve 90-percent emission reductions by 2009 — which, again, seemed a bit optimistic in the first place — but has agreed to have mercury controls mostly in place by then and to curb emissions by 90 percent by 2015 at the latest, probably earlier. This still slashes mercury emissions from Ameren more deeply and much earlier than federal rules would require.

This development is as surprising as it is welcome. The electric-generating industry gave the governor's rules a chilly reception when he announced them, and some within the industry have disputed that coal-fired plants are responsible for as much mercury pollution as their critics assert. Others have pointed out that there is no precise way of tying mercury hot spots — locations showing particularly high mercury readings — to a specific source.

And while there's always a cost-benefit discussion to be carried out on these kinds of rule proposals, the costs, for Chicago-area residents, should be slight, as most electricity here is generated by nuclear plants.

Credit is due to state EPA officials, the Blagojevich administration and Ameren itself for coming to an agreement that will, particularly if other utilities follow suit, place Illinois near the forefront of efforts to curb mercury pollution.