

EDITORIAL

Mercury pollution standards should be toughened

November 13, 2006

THE ISSUE: State legislative panel to act on mercury emission standards that are tougher than the federal government's.

WE SAY: Mercury emissions are a serious health hazard. We urge the legislators to approve the tougher standards.

The health risks associated with mercury pollution have been well documented. Exposure to excessive mercury can damage the nervous system.

Health officials warn that pregnant women who consume fish from waters polluted by mercury put the children they carry in danger of suffering a number of maladies, including cerebral palsy, mental retardation and blindness.

In the Great Lakes region, about 60 percent of the mercury pollution comes from coal-burning power plants, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Illinois is on the verge of adopting tougher standards that would greatly reduce the amount of mercury pollution caused by these plants. A key legislative step toward implementing those standards remains.

On Tuesday, members of the Illinois Legislature's Joint Committee on Administrative Rules will meet to act on the standards already given preliminary and unanimous approval by the Illinois Pollution Control Board.

Environmentalists hope the legislative committee acts this week. A deadline of this Friday was imposed for states that wanted to set their own regulations to override federal pollution standards, which are far less stringent than those proposed in Illinois. Thus, it's imperative that the legislative panel act on these recommendations promptly, and we urge committee members to approve them. Two local legislators are co-chairmen of the 12-member committee -- state Sen. Maggie Crotty (D-Oak Forest) and state Rep. Brent Hassert (R-Romeoville). State Rep. David Miller (D-Lynwood) is also on the committee.

The Illinois standards essentially would require power companies that burn coal to lower their mercury emissions by 90 percent or more by 2009. Under federal regulations, companies would have to reduce mercury emissions by 70 percent by 2018.

The bottom line is this: Illinois is fourth in the nation in the number of mercury "hot spots," primarily because of the number of coal plants in the state. Something must be done to reduce the health risks caused by mercury in Illinois.

The largest coal-burning company in Illinois, Chicago-based Midwest Generation, which has a plant in Romeoville, has conducted pilot programs that reduce emissions to 85 percent, but it said it can't guarantee the 90 percent goal is attainable by 2009.

The two next largest companies in Illinois -- Ameren and Dynegy -- voiced similar concerns, along with concerns about costs, but they were able to negotiate separate deals with the state. They will have until 2015 to reach the 90 percent mark on mercury, but they must cut other pollutants that cause smog, soot and acid rain to levels beyond federal guidelines. Midwest Generation also has been negotiating with the state, but no deal has been reached.

Considering the dire warnings being issued about mercury, we would have liked to see all companies held to the "90 percent by 2009" standard. Still, the state's proposed standards are better than the federal government's. We would hope members of the legislative committee would put the health concerns of their constituents first and foremost when they meet Tuesday and approve the pollution control board's standards.

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