

Limiting mercury

One of the problems with Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich is his scatter-shot approach. He's always firing, always proposing. Thus, the possibility exists that if you blink, you might miss a shot — maybe an important one.

Our View:

Proposed limitations of the emission of mercury make sense, as does a warning about PCBs in carp. Environmental concern is warranted.

The governor is out, now, proposing a major cut-back in the amount of mercury in the environment. That won't be without costs, but it does seem wise.

Mercury is the slippery metal most of us remember as being inside thermometers. It would scoot away if you pressed it.

Like asbestos, it was once thought to be wonderful stuff. Now we know that it can be lethal. Even low-level exposure in children can mean learning disabilities, decreased IQ and memory problems.

Mercury also affects blood pressure and fertility. A recent Sierra Club study showed one in five women in Chicago with mercury levels above federal health limits.

Most of the mercury that can be controlled in the environment comes from coal-fired power plants. They're responsible for 59 percent of the mercury in the environment, according to a report from the Illinois Public Interest Research group, which supports the governor's proposal.

What the governor is urging is a 90 percent reduction in those emissions by 2012, six years away. His estimate (although estimates of consumer costs should be taken with a grain of salt) is that this proposal would cost 69 cents a month on the average utility bill. This is not going to price utilities out of business, a representative of the Public Interest Research Group says.

That cost would pay for technology that would capture mercury as it comes out of the smokestack.

Right now, mercury emitted from the stack washes through the environment. It particularly sticks in the muscles of predator fish (those fish that eat other fish). In a related matter, Illinois health officials urged fishing families to limit themselves to one carp meal a week from fish caught between the Kankakee and Wilmington dams. Fish caught above the dam (toward Momence) were not included in the warning. The problem is PCB contamination. PCBs at high levels are a possible source of cancer.

The advisories were not meant to discourage fishing or fish consumption for most of us. The particular concern with carp is aimed at pregnant women, those who hope to become pregnant and children under 15. Another worry is that pollution shows up first in bottom-feeding carp.

There's no known way of controlling PCBs, but the state can and should act on the mercury levels.