



ENVIRONMENT: Mercury falling

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Gov. Rod Blagojevich wants a 90 percent cut in mercury emissions from Illinois power plants by 2009. It's a bold idea that deserves support.

Illinois utilities understandably would prefer to wait for the feds. And wait. And wait.

Prompted by a federal judge, the Bush Administration last year finally established a plan to reduce mercury emissions from power plants. But most of those reductions would take place after 2010; mercury emissions would only fall 28 percent between now and then, and they would only be reduced by 70 percent under the business-friendly Bush plan.

Much more can be done now. In 2002, state regulators in Massachusetts concluded that the technology already exists to reduce emissions from coal-fired power plants in that state by 90 percent. Two years later, Massachusetts enacted tough mercury regulations. Beginning in 2008, power plants in that state would have to capture 85 percent of mercury from the coal they use. By 2012, they would have to capture 95 percent.

Utilities argue, correctly, that most of the mercury found in Illinois rivers and streams comes from sources outside the state. But that's no reason to ignore local emissions that can be controlled. Coal-fired power plants are the largest U.S. source of mercury in our environment.

Utilities also argue that the public health benefits are too small to justify the costs of cleaning up mercury. But the toxic effects of mercury are cumulative; once released into the environment, mercury stays around forever. Much of the mercury found in American rivers and streams today was dumped decades ago by industry. Illinois has the fourth greatest number of mercury "hot spots" in the country. If ingested, mercury can move through the placenta to cause serious birth defects. For decades there have been periodic health warnings about eating certain kinds of fish whose tissues accumulate mercury.

In recent years, most states and the federal government have acted to limit mercury pollution from batteries in landfills and from medical waste incinerators.

Now, it's time to tackle coal-fired power plants before more mercury accumulates in rivers, streams and our bodies.