

EPA's plan cuts levels at a realistic pace

More than three decades of measured and effective federal air quality regulations show us that environmental and economic goals are mutually attainable. We have an opportunity to write another chapter in this success story with the regulation of mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants.

Last year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued first-ever rules for limiting mercury emissions from power plants. The federal plan requires a two-step phase-in of emissions reductions, beginning in 2010 and continuing through 2018, with a total mercury emissions reduction of 70 percent. This time frame allows electricity generators to plan projects and investments in a manner that provides environmental benefits as the technology continues to develop while ensuring a reliable and affordable supply of electricity.

Despite the significant investments in technology and the dramatic emissions reductions that will occur as a result of the EPA's national rule, Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the Illinois EPA want much stricter regulations that would apply only to Illinois power plants. These regulations would likely place Illinois businesses and jobs at a competitive disadvantage relative to generators in other states conforming to the federal mercury rule. Requiring Illinois power generators to invest additional millions in technology that is still developing would jeopardize the operations of generating plants and drive up consumer costs for electricity — for a public health benefit that is, at best, speculative.

Public health concerns about mercury arise from eating fish contaminated with high levels of methylmercury, a neurotoxin formed when mercury combines with other substances in bodies of water. The energy industry recognizes mercury as a serious issue and is committed to doing its fair share to address the problem. Most of the mercury that gets into fish consumed in the United States comes from the global atmosphere, to which U.S. power plants contribute little by comparison to natural sources and uncontrolled human activities in places like China and India. U.S. power plants account for only 1 percent of the total mercury emissions worldwide.

Fish is an important part of a healthy diet. Pregnant women and young children should follow the Food and Drug Administration's guidelines on which types of fish to eat and should not be scared away from the many health benefits of fish. Not eating fish creates its own public health problem.

Illinois' electric power generating industry is preparing for capital investments and technology deployments to help it comply with the federal mercury rule and other new federal air quality regulations. Illinois electricity generators are showing leadership by conducting pilot projects in the state to help develop and refine the technology and processes that will be needed to meet the new federal mercury regulations.

A solution must fit the problem. The U.S. EPA's mercury rule is based on 15 years of research and reviews. The governor's proposal overstates the ability of current available technologies to reliably and consistently achieve higher levels of mercury emissions reductions, and would have little if any impact on health risks from methylmercury.

The Illinois energy industry looks forward to a full and fair airing of these issues before the Illinois Pollution Control Board and the General Assembly's Joint Committee on Administrative Rules.

- Jim Monk is president of the Illinois Energy Association, which represents the state's investor-owned electric utilities and major independent power generators. Dr. Gail Charnley is an internationally recognized scientist specializing in toxicology, environmental health risk assessment, and risk management science and policy.

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