

Governor's time frame for cutting mercury too risky

By JAMES MONK

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Your April 9 editorial regarding standards for mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants reflected the views of only one side of the debate over whether the state of Illinois should implement its own state standards for reducing mercury emissions from power plants rather than follow federal regulations.

It is important to recognize that the issue here is not about whether Illinois power producers will significantly reduce mercury emissions but how emissions will be reduced in a reasonable and effective manner. Illinois power producers support strict mercury emission reductions and are working hard and spending millions of dollars to achieve them.

The federal Clean Air Mercury Rule will reduce mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants in the state by about 80 percent in two phases in 2010 and 2018.

This timeline was developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency after years of debate in order to be consistent with the development of mercury removal technology, while providing a cost-effective method of maintaining a safe, reliable and affordable supply of electricity.

The timeline and mandated reduction levels distinguish it in many respects from Gov. Rod Blagojevich's initiative, which at the very least overstates what technology can be reasonably expected to achieve and understates the costs and availability.

The energy industry recognizes that mercury is a serious issue, but the incremental benefits to public health of the governor's proposal compared to the federal Clean Air Mercury Rule are virtually undetectable.

Reductions in power plant mercury emissions will reduce only a small fraction of the methylmercury to which we are exposed. That is because U.S. coal-fired power plants contribute only about 1 percent of total airborne global mercury emissions.

The vast majority of airborne mercury emissions come from natural sources such as oceans, soil, volcanoes and forest fires. Also, large amounts of mercury emissions associated with human activities come from countries such as China and India, which have virtually no environmental regulatory safeguards.

Most of the fish we eat here in Illinois comes from the ocean. Eliminating U.S. power plants as a source of mercury would have no detectable effect on ocean fish, our biggest source of methylmercury exposure.

Despite what you may have read or heard, fish is safe to eat. In fact, fish is an important part of a healthy diet. Of course, women who are pregnant or plan to become pregnant, nursing mothers and small children should modify the amount and type of fish they eat.

As for your editorial's position that mercury emissions removal technology is widely available and inexpensive, the U.S. Department of Energy has noted: "Currently no single technology exists that can uniformly control mercury from all power plant flue gas emissions." Because even the activated carbon injection technology mentioned in the editorial is still in the research and development stage (in fact, our Illinois generators are actively involved in the testing that is taking place), it is premature to make a judgment regarding how effective any particular technology will be at removing minute quantities of mercury from a range of coal types and different boiler types.

Likewise, no one knows for sure what the cost of these processes is likely to be. However, what we do know about the economics of the situation is that the time frame for the governor's approach creates a very real risk that some power plants will be forced to shut down, threatening high-paying union jobs and undermining the finances of public schools and other entities dependent on taxes paid by those plants.

All of this said, make no mistake that Illinois power producers recognize that mercury is a legitimate public health issue, support significant emissions reductions, and are committed to doing our share to help reduce those emissions. For more facts and context about this debate, I would direct you and your readers to www.powerillinois.org.

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