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THE ENVIRONMENT: Existing plan for mercury pollution should work well

By Jim Monk and Gail Charnley

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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 plan requires a phase-in of emissions reductions beginning in 2010 and continuing through 2018 with a total reduction of 70 percent.

This gives electricity generators the time to plan projects and investments as the technology continues to develop, while ensuring a reliable and affordable supply of electricity.

Despite the significant investments in technology and the dramatic reductions that will occur as a result of the EPA's national rule, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the state EPA want much stricter mercury regulations for Illinois power plants. These regulations would likely place Illinois businesses and jobs at a competitive disadvantage compared with states that conform to the federal 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 the neurotoxin methylmercury. 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 atmosphere, to which U.S. power plants contribute little compared with mercury emissions from natural sources and from uncontrolled activities in places such as China and India. Worldwide, U.S. power plants account for only 1 percent of the total mercury emissions.

Pregnant women and young children should follow the federal Food and Drug Administration's guidelines on which types of fish to eat. They should not be scared away from the many health benefits of eating fish; indeed, not eating fish would create its own public health problem.

Illinois' electric power generating industry is preparing for capital investments and the installation of technology that will help it comply with the federal mercury rule and other new federal air quality regulations. The

companies that generate electricity in Illinois 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 federal mercury rule is based on 15 years of research and reviews. Gov. Blagojevich's proposal overstates the ability of current available technology to reliably and consistently reduce mercury emissions further, and it would have little impact — if any — 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.

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