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Proposed mercury rule threatens jobs, families without clear benefit

Thursday, July 27, 2006

By Margaret Blackshere

Thousands of union workers across the state help generate an important resource that many of us may take for granted: electricity.

Electricity that keeps us cool during the sweltering summer months and powers the appliances that make our lives more convenient. Electricity that sustains our schools, hospitals and businesses.

Some of these workers — employees of Illinois' 21 coal-fired power plants — may soon find their livelihoods at risk because of a proposal now being reviewed by the Illinois Pollution Control Board. This proposal was recently issued by the Illinois EPA to replace strict federal mercury emissions regulations of coal-fired power plants with even stricter — and unrealistic — Illinois-only regulations.

One of the main shortcomings of the state's proposal, however, is that it fails to clearly demonstrate how — when compared with the current tough federal regulations — it will significantly improve the environment and the lives of Illinois families.

Federal regulations now in place were developed following years of hearings, discussion and debate among the scientific and environmental communities, industry and the public.

These regulations, adopted last year by the U.S. EPA, represent the world's first and only regulations of mercury emissions from power plants. They would result in an 80 percent reduction in mercury emissions from Illinois coal-fueled power plants by 2018 — an important and major goal that we support.

The state's proposal, seeking a 90 percent reduction by 2009, dramatically accelerates the time frame within which Illinois power plants would have to make capital investments to reduce mercury emissions. Faced with these huge up-front costs, Illinois power producers will be competitively disadvantaged in the regional wholesale power markets. That's because they would have to

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compete against power producers in nearby states that either do not have such strict state-specific mercury rules or that, as regulated utilities, can pass mercury control costs along to their customers.

This could force Illinois power producers to shut down units rather than bear costs they cannot sustain. That means job losses for Illinois workers based on questionable assumptions.

Mercury emissions from U.S. coal-fired power plants represent only 1 percent of global emissions, while man-made emissions from non-U.S. sources, most notably, China, contribute more than 40 percent.

The Illinois AFL-CIO cares deeply about our environment, but believes the state's proposal could eventually force the elimination of good jobs that sustain working families — without achieving better air quality for those same family members.

The state's stricter proposal offers too little benefit and too many risks to Illinois workers.

We say stick with the federal mercury controls for the good of our economy as well as the environment.

Margaret Blackshere is president of the Illinois AFL-CIO.

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