

Control emissions at the federal level

Until about 40 years ago, Waukegan was a manufacturing town. A city of steel and smokestacks where thousands of workers toiled each day. By the mid-1970s, the Waukegan area was one of the hardest hit by the national recession. Many of those stacks ceased smoking forever. Many of the workers ceased working.

Legacies of both remain. We are still battling to clean the big lake polluted by a century of abuse. And though there is single-digit unemployment again, too many of our local residents must travel outside the county to find work.

We also still have some smokestacks. A handful of them belong to Midwest Generation's coal-fired plant in Waukegan. Fueled by Wyoming coal, the former ComEd plant generates electricity sold in a competitive marketplace throughout Illinois and 12 other states. The plant belches smoke, especially when all of us have our air-conditioners going during peak usage. The plant also generates power in an age when the nation is looking toward alternative fuel sources. It also employs dozens of local residents.

In an effort to balance similar concerns nationally, federal environmental officials met for several years with representatives of the coal and energy industries and labor and health officials. The result was new federal environmental guidelines for reducing mercury. That plan, approved last year, requires a two-step phase-in of emissions reductions from 2010 to 2018, with a 70 percent mercury emissions reduction.

Industry officials say 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.

In January, Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced a plan requiring owners of coal plants to install modern pollution control technologies that will reduce mercury pollution by an average of 90 percent by 2009.

A coalition of 35 leading Illinois medical, public health and environmental organizations supports this plan.

Pushing up the deadlines for reducing mercury emissions also happens to be one of the few issues on which Blagojevich and his Republican opponent, Judy Baar Topinka, agree.

We can't.

No, we are not for power plants spewing mercury and other hazardous emissions willy-nilly throughout the county. Because that is not what's happening. Midwest Generation and other companies selling coal-generated electricity in the state have had to comply with regulations, and now they will have to follow stricter federal regulations agreed upon by all concerns, including national health officials. More importantly, they will have a deadline by which to achieve those standards.

We would have preferred earlier deadlines than the federal regulations require. We know the emissions contribute to chronic lung diseases such as asthma, and that a recent report said a third of asthma-related deaths result from "mild" cases. And we know mercury can be harmful to pregnant women and their fetuses to the point where a can of tuna is dangerous — let alone eating too much lake trout.

However, even environmentalists say eliminating mercury emissions entirely tomorrow would not immediately solve today's health issues. But the owners of Illinois' coal generating plants, their employees and the economies in which they operate, would feel the heat right away.

Changing the regulations in Illinois without doing so for the other 12 states in which Midwest Generation and the other Illinois companies that sell electricity puts those businesses in a bad position for competing. Already Illinois is seen as unfriendly to business. This wouldn't help.

The time to strengthen the mercury emission regulations fairly in a competitive marketplace was at the federal level. Unless environmental groups want to go back to the federal drawing board or try working at a regional solution for all 13 states in the Illinois market, we suggest they leave well enough alone.

Everyone wants — and deserves — a healthy environment in which to live. Evidence suggests the new federal mercury emission

standards balance physical and financial health. That balance is key to Waukegan and Lake County's future.

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