

Assembly panel asks DNR to rethink mercury rules

By Anita Weier
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An Assembly committee is asking the Department of Natural Resources to reconsider proposed regulations that would control mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants operated by four large utilities.

The vote by the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources was 9-2, with only Reps. Spencer Black, D-Madison, and Mark Miller, D-Monona, opposed.

Those asking for a change said the DNR rule would produce only a small reduction in mercury in lakes and fish, while costing utility ratepayers more than \$100 million.

Others objected because they said that mercury is carried through the air from other states and even other nations, that it is a national problem, which should be addressed by the federal government, and that utilities were being asked to do too much too soon.

But Black called the rule important to Wisconsin.

"I don't want to see it delayed," he said. "The excuse seems to be that we should wait for the federal government. Waiting for the Bush administration to act on this is like waiting for the Brewers to win the pennant."

Miller agreed that the rule should go into effect as soon as possible.

"It would affect the biggest (emitters) in the state. This is the minimum we should do," Miller argued.

The rule would apply to Alliant Energy, WE Energies, Wisconsin Public Service Corp. and the Dairyland Power Cooperative, but not to Madison Gas and Electric, a fact that irritated some rural legislators on the committee.

Those voting to ask for modifications were Democratic Reps. Barbara Gronemus of Whitehall and John Steinbrink of Pleasant Prairie; and Republican Reps. Mark Pettis of Hertel, Al Ott of Forest Junction, Garey Bies of Sister Bay, DuWayne Johnsrud of Eastman, Scott Gunderson of Union Grove, Mary Williams of Medford, and Judy Krawczyk of Green Bay.

"I want clean water as much as anybody," Gunderson said. "It was clear through testimony that dealing with a 40 percent reduction in seven years is attainable, but 80 percent in 12 years - that was not as clear. ... This rule goes a little too far."

Gunderson and others also said they feared the result of the rule would be such an extensive shift from coal to natural gas that the result would be depletion of the latter energy source.

Johnsrud said that the costly rule would only lower mercury levels 1 percent to 4 percent.

George Meyer, the former DNR secretary who heads the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, said the committee's position ignored very real health threats to Wisconsin residents.

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