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Proposed regulations requiring Wisconsin's largest utilities to reduce their emissions of mercury are a half step in the right direction. The state shouldn't settle for that. Instead, the state Natural Resources Board should take a full step by ordering the proposal strengthened before adopting the regulations.

The proposed regulation of mercury emissions addresses a serious problem: All of the more than 15,000 lakes in Wisconsin are now covered by an advisory warning people about the level of mercury in the fish caught in those lakes.

The advisory, from the Department of Natural Resources, warns people younger than 15, nursing mothers and women of child-bearing age against eating more than one meal a week of panfish and more than one meal a month of larger fish. It is based on evidence that eating too much mercury-laden fish risks damage to kidneys and the nervous system.

The health risk posed by mercury in our lakes is threatening enough. But lakeside resort owners and other tourism businesses live with another risk: The mercury advisory damages Wisconsin's reputation as a destination for fishing vacations. That's a threat to the state's economy.

The source of much of the mercury in the lakes is coal-fired power plants. The plants emit mercury into the air. When the mercury settles in water, bacteria convert it to a more toxic form, which accumulates in fish.

Proposals to reduce mercury emissions have been in the works at the DNR for more than two years. The proposal the Natural Resources Board is to consider Wednesday at its meeting in Waupaca is a softened version. It would require the state's four biggest utilities, including Alliant Energy of Madison, to cut mercury emissions by 80 percent by 2015.

However, the proposal employs a measurement trick that means the actual reduction in emissions into the air will be more like 65 percent. The trick is that mercury emitted into the air will not be measured. Rather, the measurement will be of the mercury in the plants' fuel.

The Natural Resources Board should demand either that the actual emissions into the air be measured or, if the measurement is of the mercury content of the fuel, that the percentage of reduction be increased substantially.

Furthermore, the proposal before the Natural Resources Board is lacking a provision in an earlier draft: a requirement that when a utility builds a coal-fired power plant, it must offset new mercury emissions with reductions elsewhere. Without that provision, construction of coal-fired plants could render the mercury reductions in older plants far less meaningful.

Mercury regulations will have a cost. The current proposal is priced at \$100 million by 2015. The cost would likely be passed on to customers at the rate of about \$20 per residential customer per year - a reasonable price considering the threat if mercury emissions remain unchecked.

Opponents have argued that the state should wait until the federal government acts. The federal government will eventually need to act because mercury emissions do not abide by state boundaries. Indeed, much of Wisconsin's mercury problem is caused by emissions drifting from other states.

However, other states are adopting mercury regulations. Connecticut became the latest example earlier this month with a law requiring utilities to adopt 90 percent efficient technology to control mercury emissions by 2008.

By taking the lead in mercury emission regulation, states are not only cleaning up their own environments but also creating models for federal action. Wisconsin cannot afford to fall behind.

