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When state lawmakers rejected a plan to reduce mercury pollution produced by coal-fired power plants, they tarnished Wisconsin's reputation for leadership on environmental protection. The state Department of Natural Resources ought to try again to require cuts in mercury emissions. But in the meantime, Wisconsin can help to lead the call for the Bush administration to improve its proposal to reduce mercury pollution at coal-fired power plants nationwide.

The administration's Clear Skies proposal would require utilities to reduce mercury emissions at power plants by 69 percent by 2018. Caps on emissions would not take effect until 2010.

That's a dramatically relaxed policy compared to what had been in the works under the Clinton administration. Comparisons are difficult because mercury reduction is a complex process that can be measured in varying ways. But the previous goal was to cut mercury emissions by up to 90 percent by December of 2007.

A 2007 deadline for a 90 percent cut is too ambitious. Some power plants may be able to meet that standard at reasonable cost. But other power plants, using different technology and different kinds of coal, may require mercury abatement technology that will take years to develop the necessary reliability and cost-effectiveness.

Nonetheless, that's no excuse for the Bush proposal, which adopts an approach more befitting molasses than mercury.

Congress ought to aim for a compromise that shortens the Clear Skies timetable for mercury reductions, demands greater reductions and guarantees that no power plants increase their mercury emissions in the short term.

Wisconsin has a big stake in the outcome because mercury pollution poses a serious problem here. All of the more than 15,000 lakes in the state are covered by an advisory warning about the level of mercury in the fish caught in those lakes. The advisory is based on evidence that eating too much mercury-laden fish risks damage to kidneys and the nervous system.

The health risk leads to an economic risk. Because the mercury advisory makes Wisconsin less desirable as a destination for fishing vacations, it threatens the state's tourism industry.

Much of the mercury in the lakes is from 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.

A federal policy to reduce mercury pollution from power plants is important because mercury emissions do not confine themselves to state borders. Much of Wisconsin's problem is caused by mercury emissions drifting in from other states. Indeed, eventually an international solution will be required. Nonetheless, the importance of national and international action does not justify the failure of Wisconsin lawmakers to approve a state mercury reduction plan.

The state Natural Resources Board approved a plan that would have required the state's four biggest utilities to cut mercury emissions by 80 percent, measured by the mercury in the plants' fuel, by 2015. The regulation would have made Wisconsin the second state, after

Connecticut, to adopt new mercury emission reduction standards, which could have been models for federal legislation. However, the Wisconsin plan required the approval of the Assembly Natural Resources Committee, which shamefully rejected it.

The nation needs a plan that requires significant reductions in mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants according to a schedule sensitive to utilities' costs but intolerant of delay. To achieve that goal, the Bush administration's proposal should be strengthened.

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