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Cuts in mercury sought

State plan calls for 90% less power plant emissions

By LEE BERGQUIST

lbergquist@journalsentinel.com

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Stevens Point - Wisconsin is poised to clamp down on mercury emissions at power plants, and in doing so, regulators will be weighing issues that range from global pollution to the safety of eating Wisconsin walleye.

At issue are regulations that have moved sporadically for several years and were first pushed by conservation groups concerned about the link between smokestack emissions and mercury found in fish.

If approved when they come before the Natural Resources Board in the fall, the regulations would restrict mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants 90% by 2020.

The measure would have big repercussions in a state where 70% of the electricity is generated from coal.

Similar restrictions are being advanced in other states and by the federal government.

The costs for consumers could amount to a few dollars a month, but possibly more.

In 2003, the Department of Natural Resources estimated that reducing mercury emissions by 80% could cost consumers \$18 to \$21 a year.

Since then, technology has improved. But demand for equipment is growing, experts told board members Wednesday.

In some cases, controls can be added for as little as \$1.50 a customer, said Tom Campbell, manager of field demonstrations for ADA-ES, a Colorado-based air pollution control company.

Essentially, the DNR will be balancing regulatory costs with its mandate to protect the state's waters.

In 2001, Wisconsin upgraded its fish advisory from specific lakes to a statewide warning that urges consumers - especially children and women of childbearing age - to limit consumption of fish such as walleye or northern that tend to have higher levels of mercury.

Board members and the public were told how complex and far reaching mercury contamination is.

- A U.S. Geological Survey scientist said it could take a few years, but in some cases hundreds of years, for mercury in lakes to fall to acceptable levels in fish after controls are in place.
- Much of Wisconsin would experience little or no reduction in airborne mercury by 2020, a computer model by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration showed.
- Even with new controls in the United States, mercury from sources as far away as China float into the atmosphere and fall over places including Wisconsin.

O. Russell Bullock Jr., a meteorologist with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said Wisconsin power plants contribute 10% to 20% of mercury deposition in the state - and perhaps 30% near power plants.

"On a statewide level, I would say Wisconsin is a state where global factors are more important," Bullock said.

But experts also noted that the damage from mercury takes places after it enters water or falls on the ground and washes into a river or lake.

It then becomes potentially harmful to humans as it reacts with bacteria and other chemicals to convert to its toxic form, methylmercury.

Many northern Wisconsin lakes are naturally high in acidity. These lakes, popular for fishing and residential development, "are better at making methylmercury - we don't know why," said David Krabbenhoft, a research scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Middleton.

Tiny zooplankton pick up the methylmercury almost immediately. Small fish eat zooplankton, and as

methylmercury moves into larger species, concentrations get higher, making fish such as walleye, northern and muskellunge potentially less safe than bluegill or crappie.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, 83% of Wisconsin residents eat fish. But in a 2004 study of 1,776 people, the agency found only 17% reported that their fish meals came from local sport species.

This means many people are eating fish from other sources, said Lynda Knobeloch, a senior toxicologist with the state health department.

The five fish with the highest mercury levels in the commercial seafood market are swordfish, shark, American lobster, halibut and sable fish, she told the group.

An appetite for seafood is another reason why Wisconsin must look beyond its borders when writing regulations, environmentalists say.

"When we set the bar, we need to consider the fact that the mercury we produce comes down somewhere," said Eric Uram, an environmentalist active on mercury matters.

"Then we can say, 'We have done as much as we can here to solve the problem. We know it's coming from you. It's time for you to step up to the plate.' "

In 2004, the DNR advanced mercury legislation that is viewed as weaker - in part because of an agreement with the Legislature, then controlled by Republicans, that Wisconsin law should mirror federal regulations that eventually followed.

But last summer, Gov. Jim Doyle said he favored a higher 90% cut in mercury emission because sporting groups said the state wasn't going far enough with a 75% cut by 2015 and a goal of an 80% cut by 2018.

The state's top utility regulator, Dan Ebert, agreed that Wisconsin should require utilities to reduce mercury emissions by 90%.

But he counseled the seven-member board not to ignore economics.

In the past four years, the Public Service Commission has approved \$6 billion in infrastructure improvements for Wisconsin utilities.

Another \$3.2 billion will be spent to comply with the new federal Clean Air Interstate Rule to clean up other air pollutants.

In five years, increased spending has pushed up electricity rates 40%, Ebert said. Wisconsin now ranks among the highest in the Midwest in electricity prices.

He urged the DNR to consider wording that would not penalize utilities if they can't meet new limits because equipment technology falls short.

ADA-ES, the pollution control company, is telling customers that its equipment in some cases can reduce mercury emissions by 90% today.

Milwaukee-based We Energies is worried about how new technologies will work.

Spokesman Brian Manthey said the utility, which is experimenting with new mercury controls, wants to be assured reductions will be sustained over a long period.

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