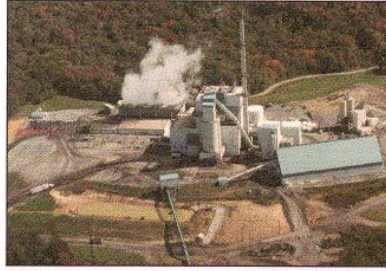


PA temperatures rise over mercury emissions

Bette Stallman

Not satisfied with the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2005 national mercury emission reduction rule, Pennsylvania has proposed its own plan to reduce mercury emissions from the state's coal-fired power plants. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PDEP), the state's rule will more effectively safeguard human health and the environment.

Pennsylvania's rule, which must be approved by the EPA, would require a 90% reduction in mercury emissions from power plants by 2015. This compares to a 70% reduction nationwide by 2018, mandated by the federal government. For the PDEP, however, the key problem with the federal rule is the provision that allows facilities to trade mercury emission allowances. Under the EPA's cap-and-trade program, a facility "could continue to emit mercury, even at higher levels than allowed, so long as it's bought credits from another facility", argues Kurt Knaus,



PA Dept of Environmental Protection

A waste-coal power plant in Pennsylvania that would be subject to the state's proposed emission standards.

PDEP's press secretary. Pennsylvania's rule, Knaus continues, "would not have a cap-and-trade program, so these would be actual reductions, meaning the facilities would have to install the technology to scrub those emissions of mercury".

Mercury from sources such as coal-fired power plants can either be deposited locally or may disperse over thousands of miles. When atmospheric mercury falls to the ground, it is converted to methylmercury, the highly toxic form that accumulates in animal tissues and can reach unsafe levels higher in the food chain. Human exposure to methylmercury, mainly through fish consumption, may cause severe neu-

rological deficits in babies and other health problems in the rest of the population.

Though Pennsylvania supports cap-and-trade programs for other pollutants, "it's absolutely irresponsible to regulate mercury [this way]", Knaus contends, pointing to mercury's known toxicity and mounting evidence that local point sources contribute substantially to hotspots of contamination.

Knaus predicts that, under the EPA's rule, Pennsylvania facilities would simply purchase credits from lower-emission facilities in western states. "What that means is that more and more people who live around facilities that burn coal without controls will suffer unfairly, because this pollutant tends to concentrate around its sources."

Pennsylvania is among at least 20 states proposing to implement state-specific regulations rather than the EPA's national rule. But the health and environmental risks of mercury may be more pressing for Pennsylvania, which is second only to Texas in total mercury emissions as well as in mercury emissions from power plants.

The EPA would not comment on specific criticisms of PDEP. ■