

The rule requires coal plants to reduce mercury pollution by 90% by 2009, making it one of the strongest rules in the country. The rules committee vote was unanimous.

Utility to cut coal emissions
Plants may close if plan too costly

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Three of the largest sources of air pollution in the Chicago area will either shut down or become dramatically cleaner within the next dozen years.

After months of negotiations with Gov. Rod Blagojevich's administration, Midwest Generation agreed Monday to deep cuts in smog, soot and mercury pollution from its six coal-fired power plants.

Company executives also raised the possibility that three aging plants--in Waukegan and Chicago's Pilsen and Little Village areas--might close if they decide it isn't worth spending millions to clean them up.

The agreement promises steady improvements in air quality throughout the Chicago area. It targets sources of pollution that for years have irritated policymakers, public health experts and environmental activists.

To broker the deal, the state compromised and gave Midwest Generation more time to meet the stringent standards. Mercury emissions will be controlled by 2009, nitrogen oxide by 2012 and sulfur dioxide by 2018.

The cuts will be faster and deeper than U.S. rules require.

"This is a really good deal for Illinois," said Doug Scott, director of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. "We're giving them a few more years to comply, but we are getting so much in return."

Midwest Generation was the last holdout on the state's proposed mercury rules, which Blagojevich issued in January in response to a Tribune series.

State and company officials announced their agreement a day before a panel of state lawmakers was scheduled to vote on the rules. Two other utilities, Ameren and Dynegy, already had cut deals, but until now there had been questions about whether the proposal would move forward.

"This agreement will help the state and city meet their clean-air

goals," said Doug McFarlan, a spokesman for Midwest Generation. "It also gives us time to assess market conditions and decide whether we should make additional capital expenditures at our plants."

Cleaning up Midwest Generation's dirty smokestacks is a critical matter for the Chicago area. Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide churning from the coal plants contribute to smog and soot that hangs over the city and its suburbs, especially during the summer.

Groups such as the Sierra Club, American Lung Association and Environment Illinois have campaigned for years to shut down or clean up the plants. They've circulated petitions, paid for ads on CTA trains and protested outside the company's headquarters.

The first step

The groups welcomed the deal as a good start.

"We would like it to happen much faster, but this is a big improvement," said Dorian Breuer of the Pilsen/Southwest Side Greens, a group trying to get a non-binding referendum on the city ballot that calls for deeper cuts in pollution.

Midwest Generation also is the state's largest source of mercury, a toxic metal that falls into lakes and streams and becomes more dangerous as it moves up the food chain. The pollutant has become so pervasive in U.S. waterways that Illinois and 43 other states urge pregnant women and children to avoid or limit eating certain fish.

The utility was responsible for 1,533 of the 5,609 pounds of mercury released into the air in Illinois during 2004, the last year for which figures are available.

"Having these old plants spewing pollution doesn't help the environment or the health of our region," said Sadhu Johnston, Daley's assistant for environmental initiatives. "We feel confident the electrical grid is secure enough, even if these plants close."

Mercury controls will be installed by July 2008 at the Pilsen, Little Village and Waukegan plants, and a year later at plants outside Romeoville, Joliet and Peoria. Emissions must be reduced by at least 90 percent by 2015.

By contrast, federal rules require utilities to reduce mercury pollution by 70 percent by 2018.

The Midwest Generation agreement represents a stark change in attitudes from an industry that only months ago complained it couldn't meet tougher standards.

The next step

Now Midwest Generation faces a series of deadlines for installing pollution controls or mothballing turbines that spin coal flames into electri-city.

In addition to the reductions in mercury pollution, nitrogen oxide emissions from all six of the company's plants must be curbed by 68 percent by 2012. Sulfur dioxide emissions must drop 80 percent by 2018.

"After all of the huffing and puffing, this is a remarkable achievement in a large industrial state that depends heavily on coal," said Howard Learner, executive director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center, who was involved in the negotiations. "This is a very important step to protect public health."