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Mercury Wars

Michael Leavitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, will announce today new standards aimed at reducing smog in the country's most polluted urban areas as well as its national parks. These are important steps in the battle for cleaner air and impose heavy obligations on an administrator who is relatively new to the job. But they cannot distract him from the equally important obligation to strengthen the administration's timid and legally suspect proposals for regulating mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants.

The mercury issue will not go away. In recent days, 45 senators and 10 attorneys general have urged Mr. Leavitt to write new and stronger rules. Senators James Jeffords of Vermont and Hillary Clinton of New York have demanded an investigation into the role industry played in drafting the existing proposals, as well as into allegations that the White House manipulated a National Academy of Sciences study in order to minimize mercury's health risks.

Mr. Leavitt can be forgiven for feeling put upon. The proposals were developed before he took the job and, as he is fond of pointing out, the Clinton administration largely ducked the issue. That does not make the administration's proposals any better. The White House boasts that its plans would achieve a 30 percent reduction in mercury emissions by power plants by 2010 and a 70 percent reduction by 2018, largely through a system that would let companies choose between reducing their own emissions or buying credits from other companies. In mercury's case, that's probably illegal, and it is certainly inappropriate. The Clean Air Act rightly requires state-of-the-art pollution controls at each individual plant for toxic substances like mercury, in part to prevent "hot spots" from developing near the plants.

There is no evidence that this approach would be prohibitively expensive, as industry claims.

On the contrary, it would force the development of cost-effective technologies, and it would certainly be better for Americans' health. Mr. Leavitt should be heading in this direction.

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