

Mercury fight heats up

The Burlington Free Press

Published: July 06. 2005 12:00AM

As hard as President Bush has pushed to loosen pollution controls on the power industry, Vermont's congressional delegation has fought to tighten them.

Senators Patrick Leahy and Jim Jeffords are in the forefront of a tug of war with the Bush administration over a mercury pollution rollback plan that puts the industry's bottom line ahead of public health. Leahy and Jeffords are at the right end of the rope.

Vermont and other downwind northeastern states are the unfortunate recipients of mercury-laced exhaust from coal-fired power plants in the Midwest. Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin that can damage the developing nervous systems of children and fetuses. Almost all states, including Vermont, have consumption warnings for fish contaminated with mercury.

Under Bush, the Environmental Protection Agency has moved to a cap and trade system that allows industry to buy and sell pollution credits. Utilities that don't meet the pollution cap could continue polluting by buying credits from other plants that do.

Leahy, with Jeffords as a co-sponsor, led an effort last week to repeal the EPA's regulations that were issued in March to allow market trading in mercury pollution. Leahy turned to the seldom-used Congressional Review Act to force a Senate debate and try to veto the agency's rules. Congress has 60 days to study and potentially reject the regulations. The president can veto, but Congress can counter by overriding the veto.

Leahy, Jeffords and 28 other senators have joined environmentalists to denounce the market trading system as an inadequate and regressive way to deal with mercury pollution. The nation's Clean Air Act and its amendments set up a tough but achievable process to clean up toxic mercury, with each plant being responsible for controlling its emissions of mercury and other toxins.

As Leahy and Jeffords have stressed, under the Bush administration plan, the nation's oldest, dirtiest power plants will be able to continue polluting at least 12 years longer than the Clean Air Act permits. Under that law, mercury controls were to have been in place on all coal-fired power plants by 2008.

Meanwhile, by the EPA's own estimate, the number of newborns at risk of dangerous levels of mercury has increased dramatically to 630,000 of the 4 million babies born in the United States each year.

In the case of polluting power plants, the Bush administration's disregard for human health and the environment has been shameful. Vermont's delegation is providing the leadership this critical issue requires.

