

E.P.A. Agrees to Deadline in '11 for Setting Rules on Mercury Emissions

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The [Environmental Protection Agency](#), resolving a lawsuit aimed at cutting the flow of mercury and other toxic substances from [coal](#)- or [oil](#)-burning power plants, has agreed to develop standards by late 2011 for limiting such emissions.

Environmental and public health groups that had sued the agency in pursuit of a deadline for issuing the standards said the agreement set the stage for closing longstanding gaps, which persisted through the Clinton and Bush administrations, in clean-air rules for power plants.

But groups representing the energy industry and companies that require large amounts of electricity warned of higher energy bills and predicted more litigation when the rules emerge.

According to the E.P.A., American power plants [emit close to 50 tons](#) of mercury a year, about a third of the nation's total emissions of the metal, along with traces of arsenic, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, dioxins and other toxic substances.

Under the new agreement, made final in a consent decree issued late Thursday by the Federal District Court in Washington, the deadline for setting standards limiting those substances is Nov. 16, 2011.

John Walke of the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), one of a dozen groups involved in the litigation, said that as of last December, when the suit was filed, only 28 percent of the coal-burning power plants in the United States had basic scrubbers for such pollution, which he called "a two-decade-old technology."

Mr. Walke said big cuts in these emissions would have substantial economic benefits, because tiny particles of toxic pollution have been linked to a variety of health problems, including an increased incidence of heart disease and strokes.

This week the [National Academy of Sciences reported](#) that the annual cost of health damage related to emissions from coal and oil burning totaled about \$120 billion in the United States, with half of that coming from coal.

Scott Segal, director of the [Electric Reliability Coordinating Council](#), a group representing the energy industry, said the industry had been steadily reducing emissions for 20 years. Mr. Segal warned that speeding the process could raise electricity costs and push more manufacturing overseas, simply moving pollution instead of cutting it.