

WNBZ
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Acid rain program reaching goals ahead of schedule

A new report says the federal government's acid rain control program reached its pollution-reduction goals two years ahead of schedule with a 100 percent compliance rate.

The report was released recently by the Environmental Protection Agency.

According to statistics in the study, power plants across the country decreased sulfur dioxide emissions to 7.6 million tons in 2008. That's well below the government-imposed annual cap of 9.5 million tons. It's also below the cap of 8.95 million tons set for 2010.

Sulfur dioxide pollution decreased by 25 percent in 2009, while nitrogen oxide pollution fell by more than 30 percent. These numbers represent record low emissions of both pollutants from coal-fired power plants.

Experts have long decried that acid rain caused by pollution from Midwest coal plants is damaging the Adirondack ecosystem.

Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal says the numbers in the report are worth celebrating.

"It worked faster than the law required and it cost far less money than anyone had projected," Houseal said in a prepared statement. "Today, more than 100 million Americans are breathing much cleaner, healthier air than they were five years ago – and the Adirondack Park is beginning to show signs of recovery."

But that doesn't mean the fight is over, Houseal adds.

"We still need to take some additional steps to control the sulfur, nitrogen and mercury pollution associated with acid rain," he said. "The Adirondack Park and other sensitive areas of the eastern United States cannot fully recover from the damage done by decades of acid rain until pollution levels drop to the limits that would be imposed by legislation now pending in Congress."

Houseal referenced a bill proposed in February by Senator Thomas Carper of Delaware. The legislation, referred to as the Clean Air Act Amendments of 2010, aims to continue the reduction of sulfur dioxide emissions to 1.5 million tons by 2018.

The bill would also require nitrogen oxide emissions to reduce to 1.6 million tons by 2018.

New York senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer have co-sponsored the bill.

“They have long recognized how much acid rain and mercury have done to harm the Adirondacks,” Houseal said. “We hope they push for its inclusion in the upcoming climate and energy legislation, which the Senate will consider in the upcoming months.”

According to experts, acid rain in New York – specifically the Adirondack and Catskill parks – has elevated mercury levels in bass, pike, walleye, perch and other fish species.

Acid rain also changes soil chemistry by bringing out inorganic mercury and converting it to its organic form, which is harmful to animals and humans alike.

Houseal says hundreds of lakes and ponds are still too acidic to support native wildlife.

“But we are confident they will recover their vitality once pollution is lower,” he said. “These results reported by EPA are encouraging. They prove we can get there.”

-Chris Morris, 4-8-10