

Wichita Eagle, Kansas
Sept 2, 2011

New EPA rule will clean the air for 240 million Americans

By Renee Schoof
McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Pollution that blows hundreds of miles from coal-fired power plants into other states will be reduced under a final plan that the Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday.

The rule, a revision of a Bush administration plan, will require pollution reductions in 27 states from Texas and Minnesota on the west to the East Coast. Cleaner, healthier air is expected as a result in the eastern, central and southern parts of the country, home to 240 million people.

The Clean Air Act requires under a "good neighbor" provision that power plants don't export pollution to other states. Some states, including North Carolina and Delaware, cleaned up their own plants but ended up with unhealthy air days anyway because of pollution from tall power plant smokestacks hundreds of miles away in other states.

"Just because wind and weather will carry pollution away from its source at a local power plant, it doesn't mean the pollution is no longer that plant's responsibility," EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said. "Pollution that crosses state lines puts a greater burden on states and makes them responsible for cleaning up someone else's mess."

Medical experts say that the fine particles and soot from power plants can be deadly, especially for people with heart and lung conditions. Bad air days also aggravate asthma and are even hazardous for healthy people who exercise outdoors.

The EPA said the new rule would prevent up to 34,000 premature deaths a year when it's phased in by 2014. It also estimated that there would be 15,000 fewer nonfatal heart attacks, 19,000 fewer cases of acute bronchitis and 400,000 fewer cases of worsened asthma each year. The numbers are compared to 2005, before the earlier rule went into effect.

While many of the nation's power plants have installed the equipment needed to reduce the pollution, others have held off.

The equipment was first required under a 2005 rule issued by the Bush administration EPA to solve the interstate pollution problem. The U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia struck it down in 2008, however, saying it was "fundamentally flawed" and didn't go far enough. The court left the old rule temporarily in place and gave the EPA a deadline to improve it.

Jackson said the new plan puts firmer caps on pollution. She said that it also gives states flexibility on how to implement the requirements.

The EPA estimated the pollution controls would cost \$1.6 billion per year over 30 years. It projected health benefits of \$280 billion per year. The agency also said that the money spent on pollution controls would create U.S. jobs.

Critics, however, warned of higher electricity rates and lost jobs.

Sen. Jon Cornyn, R-Texas, objected at a recent hearing that the rule would require Texas to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions by almost half in just six months. He said he had concerns about "the projected harm it will do to electricity producers and consumers and job creators in my home state."

Jackson told reporters at a briefing on Thursday that if Texas were not included it would contribute to air pollution affecting thousands of families outside the state. She also said that Texas had cost-effective means to reduce pollution and would be able to continue to burn coal to make electricity.

House Republicans this year have argued that the EPA has gone too far with proposed regulations on air and water pollution. Their proposed appropriations bill for the agency would cut its budget by 18 percent and restrict its authority.

Conservation and environmental groups applauded the new rule.

Clean Air Watch, an advocacy group, reported this week that 38 states and Washington, D.C., had smoggy days this year, when pollution exceeded the government limit.

"This is a long overdue and much needed step towards protecting the health of people in states downwind of big coal burning power plants. It will prove to be a life saver," Clean Air Watch president Frank O'Donnel said in an email.

The EPA said that the pollution reductions also would improve visibility in parks and reduce acid rain that harms plants and wildlife in forests, lakes and streams.

"This is a historic day for the Adirondack Park, the Catskill Park and the neighboring Appalachian Mountain Range, from Maine to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park," Brian L. Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council, said in a statement. The environmental group has been fighting acid rain since 1975.