

New EPA rule would weaken regulations for power plants

By Renee Schoof

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, October 28, 2008

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency is working at the Bush administration's direction on a new rule that would weaken regulations for power plants, allowing them to increase emissions without adding pollution controls.

EPA officials have been working on a fast track to meet a Saturday deadline, but many of them are arguing against changing the rule, said former EPA attorney John Walke and an EPA career official who spoke only on the condition of anonymity because the official wasn't authorized to make statements.

They said that the EPA was expected to decide later in November on another eleventh-hour rule that would allow more power plants to be built near national parks and wilderness areas.

The rule about power plant emissions is something that power companies have sought for many years, and it was part of Vice President Dick Cheney's 2001 energy plan. Rules finalized more than 60 days before the administration leaves office are harder for the next administration to undo.

The Clean Air Act requires older plants that have their lives extended with new equipment to install pollution-control technology if their emissions increase. The rule change would allow plants to measure emissions on an hourly basis, rather than total yearly output. This way, plants could run for more hours and increase overall emissions without exceeding the threshold that would require adding pollution controls.

The Edison Electric Institute, an association of shareholder-owned electric companies that represents about 70 percent of the U.S. electric-power industry, told the EPA that it supports changing the rule because improvements at plants would allow them to produce more energy with less fuel and in this way reduce emissions per unit of electrical output.

The EPA official said that concerns in the agency were that the analysis justifying the rule change was weak and the administration didn't plan to make the analysis public for a comment period.

The EPA originally argued that changing the rule wouldn't seriously harm the environment because another law, the Clean Air Interstate Rule, reduced power plant emissions, offsetting any increase under the new rule. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit vacated the interstate rule, however, and the EPA was stuck with having to develop a new analysis to justify the change.

Walke, who's now the director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's clean air program, said EPA officials in two departments told him they were under instructions to finalize the rule by Saturday. When such rules are made, it's common practice for the White House and the vice president's office to give the EPA their views, then the EPA chief makes a decision.

Walke said two EPA officials told him that EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson and Robert Meyers, the assistant administrator in charge of air issues, didn't agree with the new rule. EPA spokesman Jonathan Schrader said they hadn't made a decision yet and that he had no comment about their views.

Schrader said the EPA was committed to finalizing the rule by the time Bush left office in January. He said work was continuing on it and that "rumors are exaggerated" about a Saturday deadline.

The Wall Street Journal reported Monday that the administration was moving to adopt the changes to the power-plant emissions rule.

The EPA is under no obligation to reveal internal deliberations, so in many cases the public never knows what objections may have been raised.

The White House wouldn't comment on its views about changing the rule, Kristen Hellmer, a spokeswoman for the White House's Council on Environmental Quality, said Monday.

Walke charged in a comment to the EPA that the rule would amount to a "parting gift to the utility industry."

The rule change applies to old plants that are expanded or upgraded to prolong their lives. The changes can make them more efficient but not as clean as they'd be with modern pollution controls.

The emissions bring smog, acid rain and particulates. The Bush administration argues that carbon dioxide, which power plants also emit, shouldn't be regulated under the Clean Air Act.

Oregon governor outlines climate change agenda

By Joseph B. Frazier

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, October 28, 2008

PORTLAND, Ore. — Oregon's governor unwrapped an ambitious 2009 legislative climate change package with proposals for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions for homes and buildings by 2030, with benchmarks to be sure the goal is reached.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski also wants to replace the \$1,500 tax credit on hybrid vehicles with a \$5,000 credit on all-electric cars and to fund energy efficiency for 800 low-income homes a year.

Oregon already is the highest per-capita user of hybrid cars in the nation, he said Monday, and the tax credit could be better used on promoting all-electric vehicles.

Kulongoski said Oregon can be an important point of entry for such cars and that he will make that point on a trip to China and Japan next month.

He said his plan to cap and trade greenhouse gas emissions by utilities and industries in Oregon would go into effect in 2012 to allow time to make sure it is fair and workable.

While Kulongoski almost certainly will have a Democratic House and Senate likely to lean toward his goals, one leading Republican on Monday urged caution, though he commended some aspects of the climate change agenda.

"There are a number of positive incentives the governor is proposing that protect our air, water and forests," said Senate Republican Leader Ted Ferrioli. "However, we must safeguard families and small businesses that cannot shoulder anymore rate hikes or expensive regulations. Calm and caution are important as we examine all of the possible consequences in these proposals."

The cap-and-trade proposal is a part of an agreement among seven Western states and four Canadian provinces that allows industries and utilities that emit greenhouse gases to buy and sell credits. Businesses that cannot make sufficient cuts can buy the right to pollute from cleaner companies, a proposal Kulongoski says may take major lobbying because some say it could increase energy prices.

"Climate change is the most important environmental and economic issue of our time. We no longer have the luxury of looking a few years down the road," he said. The proposals he will take to the Legislature, he said, will focus "on how we live, work and move." He urged the state to show the leadership it did in passing the nation's first bottle bill and other landmark environmental laws in the 1970s.

Study: Smog chops 2 months off Mexicans' lives

By Alexandra Olson

Washington Post, Modesto Bee, and other papers, Monday, October 27, 2008

MEXICO CITY -- Mexicans would live an average of two months longer if they breathed cleaner air, Harvard researchers conclude in a study published Monday. The study found that some 7,600 people's lives were cut short each year by diseases related to air pollution between 2001-2005, representing about 1.6 percent of annual deaths in Mexico.

The highest proportion of those deaths _ 38 percent _ were in Mexico City, a mountain-ringed valley long known for its dense layer of smog.

Mexico's average life expectancy _ 72.3 years for men and 77.8 for women _ would be longer by 2.4 months if urban air quality were improved, according to the study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The researchers _ Gretchen Stevens, Rodrigo Dias and Majid Ezzati of the Harvard Initiative for Global Health _ used death records and air quality monitoring data to estimate the number of people who died from lung cancer, cardiopulmonary diseases, respiratory infections and other illnesses as a result of breathing heavily polluted air. Then they estimated what Mexico's average life expectancy rate would be if those people had not died early.

The researchers also studied the effect on mortality rates from the use of solid fuels, like coal and wood burning, and from unsafe water sanitation in Mexican homes.

From 2001 to 2005, about 3,000 people died each year from diseases related to using dirty water, while household fuels caused illnesses that killed 3,600. The study estimated that exposure to unsafe water sanitation shortened Mexico's average life expectancy by 1 month, while unclean fuels reduced it by 1.2 months.

The three factors combined killed 14,000 people a year, or 3 percent of total deaths in Mexico. Mexicans would live nearly five months longer if all three environmental problems were eliminated, the study found.

But the study found that while air pollution affected Mexicans of all income levels evenly, a disproportionate number of people in impoverished communities died from exposure to dirty household fuels and unsafe water.

The study found, for example, that improving water sanitation would reduce the child mortality rate by 6.2 percent in the poorest Mexican communities, but would have little effect in the wealthiest areas.

Worst affected were indigenous communities in the southern states of Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca. Some 50 municipalities in those states had nearly 6 percent of overall deaths and 16 percent of child deaths from the three environmental risk factors, even though only 1.5 percent of Mexico's population lives there.

"On the one hand in Mexico, air pollution is responsible for far more deaths than other environmental conditions," said Ezzati, an associate professor at Harvard School of Public Health. "On the other hand, if you look at the poor parts of the country, there is a much bigger affect from not having clean water and not having clean fuel."

The study found that while air pollution affected mostly adults, unsafe water sanitation and dirty household fuels had a bigger impact on children.

The study noted that Mexico has rapidly reduced the number of households using dirty fuel and unclean water in the past two decades, and that its overall child mortality rate was on par with wealthier countries at 5.7 per 1,000.

"Mexico has managed to be extremely impressive in reducing child mortality," Ezzati said. "But there are pockets or areas remaining where these things are still happening. So what has been done extremely effectively nationally should be done in the remaining areas."

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Tuesday, October 28, 2008](#)

If rates must rise, MID should help those most in need

It's hard to get a handle on some of the amounts being tossed around in Washington, D.C., and New York -- those figures in the millions, billions and even trillions.

Here's a number that's much closer to home -- \$16. That's how much the average monthly residential electricity bill will go up if the Modesto Irrigation District follows through on the developing consensus from staff to raise rates 15 to 20 percent next year.

MID directors will have a workshop Friday and a public hearing Nov. 4 -- yes, Election Day -- to discuss electricity rates. While residents usually pay little attention to MID business, we anticipate they'll have something to say on this pocketbook issue.

No doubt, the MID needs to raise rates. Less rain and snow generated less hydropower, meaning the MID must generate roughly 60 percent of its electricity by burning natural gas. The cost for that gas has risen over the past year. Foreclosures and conservation have reduced consumption, but also cut revenues. Further, the MID must continue to make major investments in transmission lines, windmills, power plants and other expensive equipment in order to assure that customers get the power they need and to meet increasing mandates to reduce greenhouse emissions and to provide more renewable energy to customers.

The five elected MID directors will need to weigh these demands against the economic reality for its 91,500 customers. We urge board members to:

Be sensitive to the impact that a 15 percent rate increase would have on low-income residents. The MID currently has a two-tiered residential rate system; the cost per kilowatt hour goes up for those using more than 700 kilowatt hours per month. The district should look at additional tiers in an effort to cushion the blow for those with very limited means. It also should review the effectiveness of its various discount programs.

Assure that the district is operating at maximum efficiency. Operation and maintenance amounts to less than 15 percent of the district's budget, but it still needs to be prudent in its staffing levels and in its salaries and benefits.

For 2008, the board split the rate increases, raising them 7 percent in January and 3.25 percent in May. The MID went from 1996 to 2001 without electrical rate increases. But that will be of little comfort now, in the face of double-digit rate increases for 2009 and several more years.

We would prefer the public hearing on the rate increases be conducted on a different day, when there won't be the distraction of a presidential election. The MID board joins all of the elected officials around the region in facing tough budget decisions. It's not easy or pleasant. Still, we urge MID customers to let their elected representatives on the board know their views.

[Modesto Bee, Guest Commentary, Tuesday, October 28, 2008](#)

ANOTHER VIEW: Getting lead out of our air

Excerpted from Monday's Washington Post.

President Bush has taken his fair share of lumps from us and others concerned about his seemingly all-talk-and-no-action approach to the deterioration of the environment. So, when his administration does something of benefit -- in this case, cutting the limit on airborne lead by 90 percent -- he should be given his due. The EPA's action marked the first time in

30 years the regulation had been strengthened, from 1.5 micrograms of lead per cubic meter of air to 0.15 micrograms per cubic meter. The Oct. 16 announcement by EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson was not unforeseen. The agency was under court order to do something as part of a settlement of a lawsuit brought by the Missouri Coalition for the Environment. What wasn't known was whether Mr. Johnson would follow the advice of staff experts and the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, which recommended the drastically low lead limit he ultimately adopted. The regulation would be enforced by establishing monitors in cities of more than 500,000 and by requiring states to set up air monitors near sources that release more than 1 ton of lead annually. The hitch is that there are fewer than 200 air monitors nationwide. But the agency has until 2017 to get them.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Tuesday, October 28, 2008:](#)

Our View: Valley air district adds UC Merced scientist to board

Appointment of UC Merced professor should add expertise in health issues.

A crucial appointment to the board that governs the Valley's air district has been made by the governor. Henry Forman, a professor of chemistry and biochemistry at UC Merced, will fill the spot reserved for a scientist on the board.

The scientist position is one of four new seats authorized by legislation last year to expand the board of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District.

Originally, the board had 11 members. Eight of them were sitting supervisors from the eight counties that make up the air district; three were members of city councils in the district.

The county supervisors have often leaned toward serving the interests of business and agriculture, which aren't always supporters of aggressive efforts to clean the air.

Senate Bill 719 addressed that by adding seats for a doctor and a scientist with expertise in air pollution and health issues that arise from it. In April, the governor appointed Dr. John Telles, a Fresno cardiologist, filling the spot reserved for a doctor.

Now Forman has been named to the scientist post, and he seems an excellent choice.

The 61-year-old is a founding faculty member at UC Merced, and his research focuses on the ways lungs react to and protect themselves from lung diseases, including asthma, cystic fibrosis and damage from pollutants. He earned his Ph.D in biochemistry from Columbia University.

In addition to the seats for a doctor and scientist, the board will add two more city council members, for a total of five, under separate legislation passed this year.

That will address an earlier anomaly that saw Fresno, Bakersfield and Stockton -- the three largest cities in the district, often without a representative on the board.

The expansion of the air board did not come without a struggle, but it now appears the effort is paying off. Telles has forced a more rigorous and skeptical approach to the board's work, and we hope the addition of Forman will continue that useful trend.

Much good work has been done to clean up the Valley's air, but there is a great more left to do before we can truly call our air clean.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, October 28, 2008:](#)

Fires, smoke, haze spoil Yosemite experience

I know how Helen Button (letter Oct. 22) feels. I was in Oakhurst on the morning of Oct. 18: itching eyes, scratching throat, runny nose.

I have written before about the burns in Yosemite. They go to all of the work to cut and pile the brush before burning. Why not toss the cuttings through a chipper? Let the chips blow out on the ground as mulch, which would hold down the weeds (the dry burnables).

What a disappointment for the busloads of foreign visitors when they can't see what they spent so much money to come here to see. And they go home and tell everyone how smoky it was.

Come on, get green.

Clair E. Roy, Coarsegold

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses studies show that smog reduces the life span of Mexicans by two months. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Estudio: Smog resta 2 meses de vida a mexicanos

By ALEXANDRA OLSON

The Associated Press

El Nuevo Herald, Monday, October 27, 2008

Los mexicanos vivirían unos dos meses más si respiraran aire más limpio, concluyeron investigadores de la Universidad de Harvard en un estudio publicado el lunes.

La investigación halló que la vida de unas 7.600 personas se vio recortada cada año por enfermedades vinculadas con la contaminación atmosférica entre el 2001 y el 2005, lo cual representa aproximadamente el 1,6% del índice anual de fallecimientos en México.

El promedio de vida en el país -de 72,3 años para los hombres y 77,8 para las mujeres- sería mayor en 2,4 meses si se mejorara la calidad del aire en zonas urbanas, de acuerdo con el estudio publicado en la revista Proceedings de la Academia Nacional de Ciencias.

Los investigadores -Gretchen Stevens, Rodrigo Dias y Majid Ezzati de la Iniciativa Harvard para la Salud Global- emplearon certificados de defunción y datos del monitoreo de la calidad del aire para calcular la cantidad de personas que fallecieron de cáncer pulmonar, enfermedades cardiopulmonares, infecciones respiratorias y otras dolencias como resultado de respirar aire fuertemente contaminado. Luego calcularon cuál sería el promedio de vida en México si esas personas no hubieran muerto prematuramente.

Los investigadores también estudiaron el efecto en los índices de mortalidad en hogares mexicanos a consecuencia del uso de combustibles sólidos, como el carbón y la madera, y también debido a la falta de salubridad en el agua.

Entre el 2001 y el 2005, aproximadamente 3.000 personas perdieron la vida cada año por enfermedades vinculadas con el uso de agua sucia, mientras que el uso de combustibles en los hogares provocó dolencias que mataron a 3.600 personas. El estudio calculó que la exposición a agua con una salubridad insegura disminuyó la expectativa de vida en México en un mes, mientras que los combustibles altamente contaminantes la redujeron en 1,2 meses.

Los tres factores combinados mataron a 14.000 personas al año, el 3% de todas las muertes en México. Los mexicanos vivirían casi cinco meses más si se eliminaran los tres problemas ambientales, encontró la investigación.

Sin embargo, el estudio halló que aunque la contaminación atmosférica afecta en forma similar a los mexicanos de todos los niveles de ingresos, una cifra desproporcionada de personas en comunidades empobrecidas falleció a consecuencia de la exposición a combustibles contaminantes en el hogar y agua insalubre.

