Activists Urge EPA to Limit Greenhouse Gases

RAY HENRY, Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) - Environmental activists urged the federal government Tuesday to set limits on greenhouse gas emissions from power plants and oil refineries even as Republican opponents in Congress seek to restrict or stop those rules.

The comments came during the second of five meetings that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is holding across the country ahead of its plan to issue proposed standards limiting two of the biggest industrial sources of the gases blamed for global warming: power plants and oil refineries.

President Barack Obama's administration decided to set regulatory limits on greenhouse gases after legislation that would have created a limit on those gases and allowed companies to buy and sell permits under that limit - a system called cap-and-trade - stalled last year in Congress. Republican lawmakers have argued the law would raise energy prices and hurt businesses and consumers during a recession.

During the public meeting, a combination of environmental groups told EPA officials to move forward with new limits.

"These standards are long overdue and must not be delayed," said Daniel Lashof, director of the climate center for the National Resources Defense Council.

A coalition of environmental groups organized a news conference and rally ahead of the hearing to demonstrate support for the proposal.

Seandra Rawls of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy said new standards clamping down on carbon dioxide, one of the main greenhouse gases, would encourage utility companies to retire coal-fired power plants, which produce more pollution than gas-fired plants and renewable energy sources. She said the Southeast has an older fleet of coal plants, including some that have been used longer than originally intended.

"This is a great opportunity for the EPA to hold the utilities' feet to the fire and drive the retirement of some of those older coal plants," she said.

Others told the EPA they would oppose rules allowing utility and chemical production companies to trade pollution allowances. Sharonda Williams of the New York-based We ACT for Environmental Justice said cap-and-trade systems create areas of high pollution that disproportionately hurt minorities.

"We understand the importance of flexibility and cost effectiveness" but not at the cost of compromising "or forgetting public health," she said.

It's unclear how the EPA will construct the proposed rules. Proposed standards for power plants are expected in July, followed by proposals for refineries in December. Final standards would be issued the following year.

Congressional opponents are pushing legislation that would stop the EPA from regulating greenhouse gases as pollutants. House Republicans want to ban the EPA from regulating the gases under the Clean Air Act. Republicans and some Democrats are attempting similar restrictions in the Senate.

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