PA among Those Saying EPA Rules Would Cost Jobs

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PITTSBURGH (AP) — Pennsylvania's governor is among those challenging the federal Environmental Protection Agency over when to implement long-delayed restrictions on emissions from the nation's coal-fired power plants.

Debate is shaping up between the business interests of energy companies and advocates for health and air quality, especially in places such as Pittsburgh, which is ringed by coal plants emitting mercury, heavy-metal carcinogens and soot. The EPA proposes cutting pollution from mercury and carcinogens and limiting smog and soot traveling between states.

A 2010 study by the Clean Air Task Force found that the area from across Ohio to Johnstown has the country's highest rates of mortality from coal plant pollution. In Pennsylvania, rules could prevent more than 2,000 deaths and $13 billion in health costs each year from avoidable heart and asthma attacks and cancer, according to the EPA and its supporters.

"Certainly, Pennsylvania stands to get more than its share of benefits" from stronger emissions rules, said Neil Donahue, a Carnegie Mellon University professor who specializes in air quality. "So I think it's kind of crazy for the government of the state to be standing in opposition."

Patrick Henderson, Gov. Tom Corbett's energy executive, sees it differently.

"We're all residents here, too. The governor's a resident here ... so to suggest he doesn't have the best interests of Pennsylvanians in mind is absurd," he said.

"These are highly technical rules ... and EPA does not always get it right; they've acknowledged that. To simply suggest that when you don't walk in lockstep with what the EPA is putting out there that you're always working against Pennsylvanians' best interest is just absurd."

Corbett and nine other Republican governors on Oct. 7 wrote to President Obama supporting industry concerns about the air quality proposals, among several such letters this year. The governors asked the EPA to withdraw and resubmit proposed regulations for mercury and heavy metals, known as the "air toxics standards." Meeting the deadline would cause job losses, they wrote.

"We are concerned with the fast pace of regulatory change in the air programs and increasingly stringent air quality rules," reads the most recent letter dated Oct. 19 from the office of Wyoming Gov. Matthew H. Mead that Corbett and 16 other governors signed. "The added cost of administering these many programs and rules is a financial strain on our states and creates uncertainty for utilities and industry."

The agency recently pushed from Nov. 16 to Dec. 16 its deadline to finalize rules. A lawsuit that prompted that delay is one of several court cases, studies, administrative decisions and deadline extensions that have slowed changes first proposed in 1990.

Republican opponents have relied largely on an industry-funded study to predict the economic toll, claiming the rules will be some of the most expensive in the history of the Clean Air Act. The changes in air toxics standards and cross-state air pollution rules could cost the electricity sector about $17.8 billion annually through 2030, according to the study from National Economic Research Associates Inc. sponsored by the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity.

That would accelerate closings at coal-fired power plants, costing 183,000 jobs per year from 2013 to 2020, according to the report. It predicted electricity prices would rise by a national average of 12 percent, and double that in some regions.

The EPA and its supporters tout studies claiming that the price would be lower and would be offset by benefits in other sectors. The agency estimates that adhering to the standards will save Americans $59 billion to $140 billion annually in health care costs. In Pennsylvania, the cross-state pollution rule will lower premature deaths by as many as 2,900 annually, the studies estimate. The EPA says its proposals would save Pennsylvania $13 billion to $32 billion in annual health costs by 2016.

Fifteen coal-fired power plants contribute most of the power plant pollution in the tri-state region, according to the Allegheny County Health Department. They include the W.H. Sammis power plant, which lies just across the Ohio state line and is owned by a subsidiary of FirstEnergy Corp. The Clean Air Task Force ranked it as the

third-unhealthiest plant in the country in 2010.

Mark Durbin, FirstEnergy spokesman, said the plant completed a $1.8 billion retrofit with pollution control equipment on Jan. 1.

The Pittsburgh area ranked fourth nationally for health impacts from coal-burning power plants in the task force's 2010 study, "The Toll From Coal." It estimated 242 hospital admissions, 555 heart attacks and 340 premature deaths annually in the area, more deaths than in cities such as Washington, Detroit, Atlanta and Cleveland.

"I think the governor's on the wrong side of this one. He doesn't have the facts," said George Leikauf, professor of environmental health at the University of Pittsburgh. Industry "knew it was coming ... and it's time to do something about it. It's long overdue. ... It's suicidal to think you can get away with throwing mercury into the environment and not have health costs."

The air toxics updates would be the first U.S. standards regulating mercury, arsenic, chromium, nickel and acid gases from power plants.

It took the EPA until 2005 to propose rules after years of study and delays following the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments. Environmental groups challenged the proposal, and a court threw it out as part of a consent decree in 2008. The Obama administration proposed its rules in March.

The problem is that the agency is rushing its proposal and has not properly communicated with other agencies and the energy industry, said state Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Krancer.

"We're not denying there are going to be health and economic benefits," he said. "That only occurs and comes into fruition if all the effects of implementation are studied."

Mercury and other carcinogens have a particularly concentrated effect within a couple of miles of their sources, CMU's Donahue said, though they can be strong 50 to 100 miles away. The air toxics update is designed to prevent atmospheric release of 91 percent of the mercury.

Soot and smog, causing respiratory problems and heart attacks, take time to form as particulates waft downwind. The cross-state rule would cut pollution blowing into Pennsylvania from 15 states.

The rules go hand in hand, said Jim Thompson, manager of the county's Air Quality Program. "If you control one (group), you control the other. We would have one of the biggest benefits for any area in the country."

Five hundred coal-fired power plants run about 1,200 electricity-generating units nationwide, according to the EPA. Some are more than 60 years old, and about 44 percent of coal units nationwide lack advanced environmental controls. Many companies installed "scrubbers" on plants, but others delayed that because of

capital costs. The equipment, which uses chemical mist to strip pollution from exhaust gases, can cost more than $300 million per unit, industry and health officials said.

Advocates say even that spending creates jobs for the people who make, build and operate the technology. They argue that cleaner air would make the region more attractive and competitive.

"Improved air quality pays for (itself) at a societal level," said Donald S. Burke, dean of Pitt's Graduate School of Public Health.

Doug Biden, president of the Harrisburg-based industry group Electric Power Generation Association, said he understands the concern.

"Some of the older plants, you can certainly make the argument that it's time for them to go," he said. "But in a recession, in an economy that's having trouble finding its legs, what legislator that might have that plant in his district, or what governor wants to say, 'It's time to send those employees — hundreds in some cases — home and stop sending them a paycheck?' That's a difficult decision to make."

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