EPA Asked for More Time to Study Taconite Plan

The Associated Press

Officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency heard a plea Wednesday for more time to study a federal plan for reducing emissions from taconite plants that create haze over Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageurs National Park.

The EPA is proposing tighter limits on nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions than called for by plans offered by Minnesota and Michigan. It's considering requiring a new type of "low NOx" burner for taconite pellet furnaces that already has been tested at U.S. Steel's Minntac plant. That type of burner can cut NOx pollution by up to 70 percent, said Douglas Aburano, a section chief with the EPA.

The federal government is bound by a court agreement to approve a plan by Nov. 15.

But attorney Douglas McWilliams, who advises another mining company, Cliffs Natural Resources, told EPA officials at a public meeting they should offer more than a 45-day comment period on their plan, Minnesota Public Radio reported (http://bit.ly/N0AtlP [1]). Or even better, he said, the EPA should approve the state plans offered by Michigan and Minnesota.

"These two states, Michigan and Minnesota, have decades of direct experience regulating taconite mines and their pelletizing furnaces that EPA cannot hope to replicate," McWilliams said. "Minnesota and Michigan are in a better position to assess the time and resources that it will take to evaluate the next generation of emission controls for this industry."

But environmental groups are pleased the EPA has stepped in to impose a plan.

Kevin Reuther, an attorney representing several environmental groups, including Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness and the National Parks Conservation Association, questioned whether the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is capable of regulating the mining industry.

"With this particular industry, it's really hard for the MPCA to get it right. EPA had to come in and say, 'Look, this is not the best available retrofit technology, you haven't identified any technology.' The state plan didn't require them to do anything," Reuther said. "That's why the EPA has this backstop role when the states don't act according to law. And that's what happened here."

Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides are the main causes of haze over the BWCA, Voyaguers and Isle Royale National Park. The MPCA says about one-third of the haze comes from inside Minnesota, and of that third, about half comes from northeastern Minnesota close to the parks. Researchers say all but two of

Minnesota's taconite plants contribute to more hazy days than Xcel Energy's coal-fired Sherco power plant, the state's largest power plant. The largest taconite plant, Minntac, contributes to haze in the parks every other day, on average.

The EPA recently approved Minnesota's plan to reduce emissions from power plants like Sherco. But the state plan for the taconite plants merely directs them to use best practices in running their furnaces, and to operate them efficiently and cleanly. It doesn't specify what technology they must use. The EPA decided that was not enough.

"Controls do seem to be feasible and economically reasonable, so we think that could be applied at the different facilities that are not currently applying that technology," Aburano said.

But McWilliams said it would take months to design low NOx burner systems that might work for each furnace at each taconite plant, and longer to model emission reductions and determine costs.

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