EPA issues rules to cut haze over Voyageurs, BWCA

The Associated Press

Federal regulators have issued final regulations aimed at reducing pollution from taconite processing plants that causes haze over northern Minnesota's wild areas including Voyageurs National Park and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, as well as Isle Royal National Park in Michigan.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said the plan will cut pollutants that not only affect visibility at times in the national parks and wilderness area, but are also harmful to human health.

The EPA said the regulations are expected to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides, or NOx, by about 22,000 tons per year and sulfur dioxide emissions by about 2,000 tons, resulting in noticeably clearer air on many days.

The 202-page final rule will force some taconite operations to add expensive new equipment to curb nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide, the Duluth News Tribune reported Thursday.

The rule, signed by EPA chief Lisa Jackson on Tuesday, affect all six taconite operations in Minnesota as well as the lone taconite operation on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. New taconite plants would also be expected to meet the standards.

The EPA stepped in after concluding that the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's plan didn't go far enough. The state in April essentially said the industry was doing all it reasonably could to control its contributions to the regional haze problem.

But the federal agency decided the plants should install low-NOx burners to bake their taconite pellets — a so-called best available retrofit technology, also known as BART. The regulations set specific limits on how much haze-causing air pollution each plant can emit.

When the EPA issued a draft of the regulations in August, taconite companies balked at the timelines and the potential cost.

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency officials told The Associated Press on Thursday they hadn't had enough time to study the final rule in detail, but that they're still concerned about whether the new timelines are realistic.

"We're optimistic about the direction that EPA has taken with the plan, though we are concerned with the manner in which it was taken," said Frank Kohlash, manager of the MPCA's air assessment section.

Mary Jean Fenske, air policy supervisor in MPCA's air assessment section, said their understanding is that the EPA last August proposed giving the plants 18 months to install the low-NOx burners, but extended that in the final rule to 26 months. Plants with two or three furnaces would get another year for each one, she said.

Kolash said agency and company officials planned to hold a conference call next week to discuss whether the companies can do the necessary engineering work and get through the MPCA's permitting process within the EPA's timelines. He said he understands that the EPA could still revise the deadlines and emissions limits, but predicted that the federal agency would want to see concrete progress before considering any change.

The low-NOx technology has been tested at U.S. Steel's Minntac operations in Mountain Iron and apparently worked well there, state officials have said.

Environmental groups that campaigned to require the state-of-the-art emissions controls for taconite plants pointed out to regulators that, in addition to impairing visibility, haze pollutants contribute to heart attacks, asthma attacks, chronic bronchitis and respiratory illnesses.

Among the groups active in trying to shape the regulations was the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. Its legal director, Kevin Reuther, told the AP he had not had a chance to study the final rule and could not comment on it Thursday.

Cliffs Natural Resources, which runs three of the affected taconite operations in Minnesota, also needs more time before it can comment, company spokeswoman Sandy Karnowski told AP.

Park haze rules aimed at the region's coal-fired power plants are proceeding separately.

The MCEA and five other clean air groups sued the EPA in December, seeking a court order requiring the federal agency to mandate that Xcel Energy install the "best available retrofit technology" to reduce emissions at Minnesota's biggest power plant, the coal-fired Sherco plant near Becker. The groups said the state's plan for Sherco is inadequate because it doesn't require BART.

Xcel Energy has said the $50 million it's investing in improvements to cut Sherco's emissions is sufficient. The utility also denies that Sherco contributes to haze affecting the two parks and the BWCA.

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Online:

EPA site on haze rules for taconite plants: http://www.epa.gov/region5/air/taconite [1]

MPCA regional haze site: http://bit.ly/VMZ696 [2]

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[1] http://www.epa.gov/region5/air/taconite
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