Wyo. Governor Blasts EPA Over Haze Plan

BOB MOEN, Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — Gov. Matt Mead sharply criticized a plan by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to reduce regional haze, saying it did more to kill the coal industry than clear Wyoming's air.

The EPA plan seeks to reduce haze in national parks and wilderness areas by further limiting air pollution from coal-fired power plants in Wyoming. The state has offered its own proposal, but EPA has rejected parts of it as inadequate and has proposed changes.

During a public hearing Wednesday conducted by EPA officials, Mead said the agency's plan would cost utilities more than $1 billion to improve and retrofit coal-fired plants with pollution devices and an additional $100 million a year after that to maintain clear air standards that only marginally improve on what Wyoming's proposal would do. Much of that cost will be passed on to ratepayers, Mead said.

"I can't think of a worse way to hurt those who are lower income or middle income and to make no difference," he said. "We are not talking about a health standard here, we're talking about a visibility standard."

In his first testimony before a public hearing since being elected governor in 2010, Mead said he can only conclude that the motive for EPA's action is to kill the coal industry, which drives a huge portion of Wyoming's economy. Wyoming produces around 40 percent of the nation's coal and more than any other state by far.

"We do feel like coal has been targeted and you know if you want to do that you have to say how are you going to replace 40 percent of this country's electricity and at what costs, not just the initial dollars but in terms of people trying to achieve the American dream," he said.

Other state officials and power company executives testified against the EPA plan, noting that much of Wyoming's visibility problems can be attributed to forest fires, not power plant pollution.

However, Cheyenne resident Edith Cook said she favors stricter pollution controls proposed by the EPA.

Cook suggested that the state use some of its energy tax windfall to help utilities "retire aging coal fired plant, retrofit newer ones with scrubbers and move toward renewables."

"It's not like Wyoming is in the poor house," she said.

Cook said Wyoming's economy is too reliant on the fossil fuels industry and it would

benefit from diversifying with thermal, wind and solar.

The EPA is taking public comments through Aug. 26 and has scheduled another public hearing July 26 in Casper on the proposal.

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