CO Proposes Air Quality Crackdown For Drillers

KRISTEN WYATT, Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Under pressure to tighten air quality standards for oil and gas drillers, Colorado officials on Monday proposed the nation's first statewide standards for methane emissions and other heightened safeguards.

The proposed rules don't require more state inspections of drilling sites. But they do recommend a system of infrared cameras to speed detection of leaks from tanks and pipelines. The monitoring has an estimated price tag to the industry of $30 million.

The new regulations "reflect a real desire and a push to see something a little stronger on the health side," said Dr. Larry Wolk, Colorado's chief medical officer.

Some local governments, such as Los Angeles County, regulate drilling methane emissions, but Colorado's would be the first statewide standard.

"These are going to amount to the very best air regulations in the country," said Gov. John Hickenlooper, a Democrat and former geologist who has resisted legislative efforts to crack down on the oil and gas industry.

Colorado's Air Quality Control Commission could make the rules final by February. Health officials predicted the regulations would reduce volatile organic compounds emissions by 92,000 tons a year, a reduction of more than a third from 2011 rates. The estimated reduction represents more than so-called VOC emissions by all cars in Colorado in a year.

The rules are significantly stricter than some draft rules floated earlier. Wolk called those rules a "straw man proposal" but conceded that public reaction to those rules wasn't enthusiastic.

"We felt that we needed to get stronger," Wolk said.

Earlier this month, a group of concerned moms showed up at Hickenlooper's office

with dolls they called "gas patch kids" to represent children living in areas impacted by the surge of oil and gas drilling in the state.

And two weeks ago, voters in four Front Range communities voted to ban hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. That's a drilling procedure not addressed in the air quality regulations, but the votes indicated public health concerns with the booming oil and gas industry.

Industry representatives joined the announcement Monday and said the proposals are tough but fair. Hickenlooper said they'll clean the air but keep the industry profitable.

"Public health is going to come first ... but we respect the fact that they're a business," Hickenlooper said.

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