U.S. Tightens Standards For Soot Pollution

Matthew Daly, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration on Friday imposed a new air quality standard that reduces by 20 percent the maximum amount of soot released into the air from smokestacks, diesel trucks and other sources of pollution in its first major regulation since the Nov. 6 election.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson said the new standard will save thousands of lives each year and reduce the burden of illness in communities across the country, as people "benefit from the simple fact of being able to breathe cleaner air."

As a mother of two sons who have battled asthma, Jackson said she was pleased that "more mothers like me will be able to rest a little easier knowing their children, and their children's children, will have cleaner air to breathe for decades to come."

Announcement of the new standard met a court deadline in a lawsuit by 11 states and public health groups. The new annual standard is 12 micrograms per cubic meter of air, down from the current 15 micrograms per cubic meter.

The new soot standard has been highly anticipated by environmental and business groups, who have battled over the extent to which it would protect public health or cause job losses. The EPA said its analysis shows the rule will have a net benefit ranging from about $3.6 billion to $9 billion a year.

A study by the American Lung Association and other groups said the new standard will save an estimated 15,000 lives a year compared to the current standard — many in urban areas where exposures to emissions from older, dirty diesel engines and coal-fired power plants are greatest.

Soot, or fine particulate matter, is made up of microscopic particles released from smokestacks, diesel trucks, wood-burning stoves and other sources and contributes to haze. Breathing in soot can cause lung and heart problems, contributing to heart attacks, strokes and asthma attacks.

Environmental groups and public health advocates welcomed the new standard, saying it will protect millions of Americans at risk for soot-related asthma attacks, lung cancer, heart disease and premature death.

Dr. Norman H. Edelman, chief medical officer for the American Lung Association, said a new standard will force industries to clean up what he called a "lethal pollutant." Reducing soot pollution "will prevent heart attacks and asthma attacks and will keep children out of the emergency room and hospitals," Edelman said in a statement. "It will save lives."

But congressional Republicans and industry officials called the new standard overly strict and said it could hurt economic growth and cause job losses in areas where pollution levels are determined to be too high. Conservative critics said they feared the rule was the beginning of a "regulatory cliff" that includes a forthcoming EPA rule on ozone, or smog, as well as pending greenhouse gas regulations for refineries and rules curbing mercury emissions at power plants.

Ross Eisenberg, vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers, said the new soot rule is "yet another costly, overly burdensome" regulation that is "out of sync" with President Barack Obama's executive order last year to streamline federal regulations.

The soot rule will "place many promising new projects — and the jobs they create — into permit limbo," Eisenberg said.

A letter signed by one Democratic and five Republican senators said the EPA rule would "impose significant new economic burdens on many communities, hurting workers and their families just as they are struggling to overcome difficult economic times."

The letter cited EPA data showing that air quality in the United States is at its highest level in 30 years — a sign that the current standard is working, the senators said.

A letter signed by 56 House Democrats said the new standards will mean fewer hospital trips for millions of people and billions of dollars saved.

"Morally and fiscally, this is a no-brainer," said the letter, initiated by Rep. Charles Rangel, a Democrat. He and other supporters said the new standards were particularly important in urban areas such as New York and Los Angeles, where soot and smog and can make breathing difficult.

The letter cited a report issued last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicating that racial minorities are more likely to live in areas where air pollution fails to meet national standards.

Jackson and other administration officials said the new rule was based on a rigorous scientific review. Only 66 of more than 3,000 U.S. counties would fail to meet the proposed standard, which takes effect early next year.

The EPA said it would start designating counties that fail to meet the new soot standards as soon as December 2014, but would give states up to five years to meet the revised standard.

All but seven counties in the United States — all in California — are projected to meet the new standard by 2020 with no additional actions needed beyond compliance with existing and pending rules set by the EPA, EPA officials said. Jackson and other officials said they will work with states and counties to ensure they can meet the new standards without penalties.

The Obama administration had sought to delay the new soot standards until after the November election, but a federal judge ordered officials to act sooner, and the administration released a proposed rule in June.

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