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Group calls for lower emission caps

Rule as it stands won't help Knox achieve compliance, says Environmental Defense

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JEFF ADKINS / NEWS SENTINEL

Knoxville and other smoggy cities likely will remain out of compliance with new federal particulate matter standards even if federal regulators approve a proposal to reduce harmful power plant emissions, prompting a leading environmental group to call for lower emission caps.

A report issued Tuesday by Environmental Defense urges the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to strengthen its proposed Clean Air Interstate Rule. The rule would set statewide limits on sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide at power plants in Tennessee and 28 other eastern states.

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The pollutants help form both smog and particulate matter. Fine particles like soot are smaller than 1/30th the diameter of a human hair and contribute to breathing disorders and cardiovascular diseases.

Utilities would have to spend one-third more to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions under the Environmental Defense recommendation than under the proposed EPA rule. However, the report notes an EPA estimate that every dollar spent on pollution control results in a \$20 savings in health-care costs and other benefits.

The national report shines a glaring spotlight on Knox County's dirty air. Knoxville is at the center of a nonattainment area for ground-level ozone and will be out of compliance with new fine particulate matter standards that go into effect later this year.

Michael Shore, one of the study's co-authors, said a lower cap on sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions would likely tip the balance toward clearer skies.

"The additional reductions would probably bring (Knox County) into attainment," Shore said, though he added that EPA hasn't published calculations using lower caps.

"Power plant and cleanup standards are long overdue. We know the health-care costs in Tennessee and the U.S. There's no reason EPA should wait. They should strengthen and finalize the rule."

Lynne Liddington, director of Knox County's air quality program, confirmed that every computer model shows the county won't be in compliance with fine particle standards until after 2018 even with the rule in place. Other cities that won't come into compliance under its provisions include Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, Birmingham, Ala., and Cleveland, Ohio.

The EPA's proposal, Liddington said, "doesn't go far enough and it doesn't go quick enough."

If implemented as it's now written, the proposed rule would reduce sulfur dioxide emissions by 70 percent and nitrogen dioxide emissions by 65 percent by 2015, according to the EPA.

The Tennessee Valley Authority's environmental policy chief said the EPA's rule would be tough to meet as it is. TVA and other utilities have asked for an additional year to meet the first phase goals.

"What the EPA has proposed will be a challenge for the utility industry," said TVA vice president John Shipp. "It will be tough for us to get down to those levels within the time frame EPA has proposed."

EPA spokesman John Millett conceded that Knox County would be "one of the few areas that wouldn't come into compliance, but that doesn't mean it wouldn't get some significant help from the Clean Air Interstate Rule."

Millett said EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt likely would make his decision this fall, possibly before the election.

Using EPA data, the Environmental Defense report, entitled "Stop Blowing Smoke in the Heartland," calculates that 40 percent of the air pollution fouling East Tennessee air drifts in from other states, primarily Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Alabama and Georgia.

Of all eastern cities, only Louisville, Ky., receives a higher percentage of its pollution from out of state. St. Louis and Knoxville receive about the same ratio.

About 9.2 percent of the fine particles wafting into Knox County comes from sources elsewhere in Tennessee, according to the calculations, while half is produced locally.

The report's numbers didn't surprise TVA's Shipp.

"Our emissions affect people all around us," Shipp said, "and their emissions affect us."

The Environmental Defense report credited the EPA with moving forward on the rule. But it estimated that a stronger rule would scrub nearly 40,000 additional tons of sulfur dioxide and 14,000 tons of nitrogen oxide out of Tennessee's air while resulting in 90 fewer premature deaths and 6,000 fewer child asthma episodes statewide.

According to the EPA, power plants account for two-thirds of sulfur dioxide emissions and nearly a quarter of nitrogen oxide emissions. In East Tennessee, the TVA's Kingston Steam Plant emits 10 times the sulfur dioxide and 126 times the particulate matter than the combined number of vehicles that travel Knox County roads.

The proposed Clean Air Interstate Rule would establish annual emissions caps of 2.7 million tons of sulfur dioxide in the affected states by 2015. The EPA's cap for nitrogen oxide would be 1.3 million tons.

Environmental Defense's proposal would result in yearly tonnage caps of up to 2 million and 1 million for sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, respectively.

The report said lower caps would increase the costs to utilities by \$500 per ton for each pollutant - to \$1,500 per ton of sulfur dioxide reduced at the smokestack and \$2,000 per ton of nitrogen oxide.

The report points out that the paper, mining, petroleum and metal production industries pay many times

more than utilities to meet federal standards. The pulp and paper industry, for example, pays more than \$10,000 per ton.

Shipp declined to release the cost-per-ton estimates for TVA, which is spending \$1 million per day on technology upgrades to reduce harmful emissions at Kingston and other steam plants. He also wouldn't comment on spending relative to other industries.

Congressional action could also result in lower caps. The Clean Air Planning Act, a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., proposes capping sulfur dioxide emissions at the same level as the Environmental Defense report.

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