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POLITICS | POLICY

Stricter Soot Limits Will Save Up to \$46 Billion in Healthcare Costs, Federal Officials Say

The new EPA air-pollution rule is another blow to the coal industry

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Coal-fired power plants and other industrial facilities emit fine particles that cause severe health problems. PHOTO: CHARLIE RIEDEL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A new air-pollution rule that federal officials say will save lives and money will also deal another blow to the struggling U.S. coal industry.

The Environmental Protection Agency announced Wednesday its final rule to limit fine-particle pollution—or soot—emitted by power plants, industrial facilities, diesel trucks, road surfaces and factories. These particles, which are less than 2.5 micrometers in diameter, can get into the lungs and bloodstream, causing severe health effects such as heart attacks, asthma and cardiovascular diseases.

The rule will require states to monitor air quality and meet a new standard of 9 micrograms of soot per cubic meter, down from an existing standard of 12

micrograms per cubic meter, a change the EPA said will prevent up to 4,500 premature deaths and save up to \$46 billion in net health benefits in 2032.

The rule change was largely expected and drew more than 700,000 public written comments from industry, environmental and public-health groups.

Although the rule doesn't crack down on power plants directly, it is one more bit of bad news for the nation's coal industry. The governors of Kansas and Kentucky have asked President Biden to block the rule, saying it would hurt jobs in their respective states and be difficult to achieve.

"Given the vast majority of PM2.5 emissions come from nonpoint sources like wildfires, we urged the administration not to go too far or target American businesses by setting its particulate matter standard too low," said Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R., W.Va.), referring to fine inhalable particles. "It's disappointing to see the EPA is moving ahead without considering these important factors."

In West Virginia, the number of mining jobs dropped from 25,000 in 2010 to about 12,000 today, according to John Deskins, director of the West Virginia University Bureau of Business and Economic Research. The coal industry is staying afloat by exporting coal to Europe and Asia, as well as producing metallurgical coal for steel production, he said.

In 1990, coal produced more than half of the nation's supply of electricity. That has dropped to less than 20% today, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Other experts note that most of the U.S. coal industry has adapted to an energy mix that includes burning natural gas and ramping up renewables such as solar and wind power.



A coal mine in Kentucky, whose governor says the new EPA rule limiting soot pollution will hurt jobs in the state. PHOTO: DIANE DESOBEAU/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Utilities have closed many older coal plants that were unable to meet existing air-pollution requirements, and retrofitted those that remain in operation, according to Michael Wara, director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program at Stanford Law School.

“A lot of the dirtiest and most inefficient units are gone,” Wara said.

The new rule will require some retrofitted power plants—as well as cement factories and other industries—to have even more-stringent controls to further slash sources of soot pollution, according to EPA officials.

An array of industry groups had pushed back on the proposed rule, arguing in part that it would make permitting needed factories and other projects more difficult.

Around 569 counties would fall out of compliance, far more than EPA estimates, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Exemptions for nonindustrial sources of soot such as wildfires haven’t been granted consistently in the past, which could make compliance more difficult, said Marty Durbin, the Chamber’s senior vice president for policy.

Cement makers said the new rule would hurt the Biden administration’s infrastructure and climate goals. The changes will lead to less time of plant operations, layoffs and “less American cement and concrete at a time when the

country needs more,” said Mike Ireland, chief executive of the Portland Cement Association.

Because of the variety of industries affected, EPA officials said they didn’t estimate the employment impact of the new rule.

The new EPA clean-air requirement fits with other efforts by the Biden administration to polish its green credentials. It is part of an effort by the Biden campaign to highlight differences between him and former President Donald Trump, who promised to undo many of the administration’s environmental rules if he wins re-election. Tougher environmental rules, such as stricter soot curbs, will likely win over progressives and young people who have been unhappy with many Biden administration policies.

Many climate-focused progressives are frustrated that Biden reneged on a promise to stop all new offshore drilling. Last month, Biden also effectively froze the approval process for new plants to export U.S. liquefied natural gas, a major win for some progressive activists.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan said soot pollution is a health problem for millions of Americans.

“The impact of this pollution oftentimes disproportionately affects our most vulnerable communities, including low-income communities, communities of color, children, older adults and those who struggle with heart or lung conditions,” Regan said Tuesday.

The EPA projects 99% of U.S. counties will meet the tougher air-pollution standard by 2032. Of the 52 counties that are predicted not to meet the standards, 23 are in California, which has a mix of air pollution from agricultural operations, industry and seasonal wildfires. The rest is in Oregon and Montana, which have suffered from extreme wildfires in recent years.

Controlling smoke and particulate matter from wildfires has been a difficult problem for state and local air-quality officials, according to Paul Ferraro, professor at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School.

“For the states that have the most counties out of compliance, wildfires are the wild card for them,” Ferraro said. “It’s been a problem for a couple of decades,

and it's going to be a couple of decades in finding a solution.”

The EPA will spend the next two years sampling air quality to find areas that aren't meeting the new standard. States, tribes and municipalities have until 2032 to comply with the requirement.

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