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National Journal
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Wall Street Journal
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Atlanta Journal-Constitution
EPA issues mercury-reduction standards for power plants
By Kristi E. Swartz
December 21, 2011

St. Louis Today
EPA finalizes mercury limits for coal plants
BY JEFFREY TOMICH
Wednesday, December 21, 2011

StateImpact Texas
New Rules Approved for Pollution from Coal Plants
December 21, 2011

NY Times (Green Blog)
E.P.A. Issues Limits on Mercury Emissions
By JOHN M. BRODER
December 21, 2011, 2:00 PM

The Courier-Journal
EPA mercury limits expected on coal plants
12:31 PM, Dec. 21, 2011

The Plain Dealer
U.S. EPA issues tough mercury and other toxic emission standards; some coal-burning power plants may close
Wednesday, December 21, 2011, 2:32 PM
By John Funk

Bangor Daily News
Collins, Snowe urged to support clean air rules
By Jackie Farwell, BDN Staff
Posted Dec. 19, 2011, at 5:44 p.m.

Time (EcoCentric Blog)
December 21, 2011

The Talk Radio News Service
EPA Issues New Air Pollution Rules
Wednesday, December 21, 2011 At 2:40PM

Think Progress
On Fox News, Ed Whitfield Denies 'Any Benefit' To Babies And Pregnant Women From Reducing Mercury Levels
By Brad Johnson on Dec 21, 2011 at 2:38 pm

MSNBC
Power plant rules unveiled: Higher bills, cleaner air
Coal-fired power plants across U.S. will have to reduce pollutants

EPA forces dirtiest power plants to clean up toxic air pollution, but gives leeway on timing
DINA CAPPIELLO
Associated Press
12:53 PM CST, December 21, 2011

WASHINGTON (AP) — The largest remaining source of uncontrolled toxic air pollution in the United States, the nation's coal- and oil-fired power plants, will be forced to reduce their emissions or shut down, under a federal regulation released Wednesday.

The long-overdue national standards for mercury and other toxic pollutants are the first to be applied to nation's oldest and dirtiest power plants.

About half of the 1,300 coal- and oil-fired units nationwide still lack modern pollution controls, despite the Environmental Protection Agency in 1990 getting the authority from Congress to control toxic air pollution from power plant smokestacks. A decade later, in 2000, the agency concluded it was necessary to clamp down on the emissions to protect public health.

Decades of litigation and changing political winds have allowed power plants to keep running without addressing their full environmental and public health costs.

EPA administrator Lisa Jackson said in a statement that the standards "will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs."

The rule ranks as one of the most expensive in the EPA's history, with an estimated $9.6 billion price tag.

Its release comes after intense lobbying from power producers and criticism from Republicans, who said the rule would threaten jobs and electric reliability and raise electricity prices.

To ease those concerns, the administration will encourage states to make "broadly available" an additional fourth year to comply with the rule, as allowed by the law. Case-by-case extensions could also be granted to address local reliability issues.

Some in the industry wanted an automatic and longer delay, to ensure that the combination of power plants retiring and those shutting down temporarily to install pollution control equipment would not affect reliability. But even the chair of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the independent body that ensures electric reliability, did not see evidence for a blanket extension.

An AP survey of 55 power plants producers found that more than 32 mostly coal-fired power plants in a dozen states would retire because of the regulation issued Wednesday, and another rule aimed at reducing pollution downwind from power plants. The survey found, however, that the power plant retirements alone would not cause homes to go dark. Another 36 power plants may have to shut down because it would be cheaper than complying with the rule. The estimated age of the units retiring or at risk was 51 years.

For coal, which was already struggling because of low natural gas prices and lackluster demand for electricity, the environmental regulations may well be the final blow.

Two other federal environmental regulations in the works to address cooling water intakes and coal ash disposal could lead to more power plant retirements, according to experts.

WFPL News
EPA Finalizes Rules to Limit Mercury, Other Heavy Metals, Emitted from Power Plants
by ERICA PETERSON on DECEMBER 21, 2011

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has unveiled new rules that will reduce pollution from power plants.

The rule has been in the works for more than two decades, and the EPA was under a court order to finalize the rules by last week. Under the rule, utilities will have to drastically reduce the amounts of toxic metals power plants emit into the air.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson made the announcement at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. She says the rule will have invaluable health benefits.

"Once the rule is fully implemented in 2016, it will prevent up to 11,000 premature deaths, 4,700 heart attacks and 3,100 emergency room visits among children," she said.

Many utility companies have lobbied against the standard, but in an effort to show that not all companies are against it, the EPA invited Baltimore-based Constellation Energy Vice President Paul Allen to speak at the press conference. Allen praised the EPA for seeking input from all stakeholders, and says companies should have had time to prepare.

"Companies have had a lot of time to think about, consider, and prepare for the response to these rules depending on how the final rule shakes out," he said. "Options have been considered and options are available to companies to comply with the rule."

The EPA estimates that most plants will be able to comply in three years, and states will be allowed to extend the deadline for another year. The EPA will consider any utilities who can't comply within four years on a case-by-case basis.

The state has approved Louisville Gas and Electric and Kentucky Utilities' plan to comply with the rule. That plan—which includes shutting down several coal-fired plants—is scheduled to be fully implemented by 2016.

EPA requires limit on mercury emissions from power plants
By Alex Mooney, CNN
updated 5:20 PM EST, Wed December 21, 2011

(CNN) -- The Environmental Protection Agency finalized new federal standards on toxic pollutants and mercury emissions from coal power plants Wednesday, a move being praised by environmentalists but criticized by others, who predict lost jobs and a strain on the nation's power grid.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, at an event at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, announced that for the first time U.S. coal and oil-fired power plant operators must limit their emissions of mercury and other hazardous air pollutants.

"I am glad to be here to mark the finalization of a clean air rule that has been 20 years in the making, and is now ready to start improving our health, protecting our children, and cleaning up our air," Jackson said. "Under the Clean Air Act these standards will require American power plants to put in place proven and widely available pollution control technologies to cut harmful emissions of mercury, arsenic, chromium, nickel and acid gases. In and of itself, this is a great victory for public health, especially for the health of our children."

EPA rules in place since the 1990s target acid rain and smog-forming chemicals emitting from power plants, but not mercury, a neurotoxin known to damage developing fetuses and children.

Despite federal limits on emissions of mercury from other sources, such as waste incinerators, there have been no limits on coal-fired power plants, which the EPA says constitute the single largest source of mercury emissions.

"These standards rank among the three or four most significant environmental achievements in the EPA's history," said John Walke, clean air director of the National Resources Defense Council. "This rule making represents a generational achievement."

The new regulations are among the most wide-reaching to come from the EPA during Barack Obama's administration. They include separate limits for mercury emissions, acid gasses, and other pollutants from several metals.

Specifically, the EPA will impose numerical emission limits for all existing and future coal plants and propose a range of "widely available, technical and economically reasonable practices, technologies, and compliance strategies," to meet the new demands.

According to an EPA analysis, the larger economic benefits of the reduced pollution will more than pay for the short-term clean-up costs. The EPA also predicts more jobs will be created than lost as power plants invest million of dollars in upgrades.

It also estimates the new regulations, by reducing people's exposure to these toxins, will prevent 11,000 premature deaths each year and trim health costs.

"EPA estimates that for every dollar spent to reduce pollution from power plants, the American public will see up to $9 in health benefits. The total health and economic benefits of this standard are estimated to be as much as $90 billion annually," the agency said in a news release.

But the EPA also acknowledges the regulations will result in increased power grid strain: by its estimate, 14.7 gigawatts of power supply will be eliminated from the U.S. power grid when the rules take effect by 2015. That figure -- enough to power well over 10 million U.S. households -- is overly optimistic, according to other industry analyses.

Several industry groups and some Republicans also disagree about the economic impact the new regulations will have.

Reps. Darrell Issa and Jim Jordan, chairmen of the House Oversight Committee and subcommittee on Regulatory affairs, respectively, sent a letter to the White House earlier this week claiming the "EPA has failed to perform a proper analysis of the rule's impact on job creation" and "consider the rule's impact on grid reliability."

The new rules have also made their way to the Republican presidential campaign trail, with Jon Huntsman recently predicting increased brownouts during the summer and Rick Perry declaring the EPA is a "job-killing" agency.

And the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a group traditionally sympathetic to Republicans, has aired ads urging listeners not to "let the EPA turn out the lights on the American economy."

But the Obama administration has found an ally in New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who argued in a recent op-ed for the Huffington Post that the new standards are gravely needed.

"We can stop this," Bloomberg wrote of mercury poisoning. "We can spare children this tragic injustice and the pain it brings their families. We can spare adults from losing years off their lives. And we can spare taxpayers the enormous health care costs that come with mercury-related-illnesses."

Environmentalists, who earlier his fall were outraged with Obama over his refusal to push for ozone emission standards the EPA supported, are also strongly on board.

"This bold new announcement means less contaminated fish -- and more protections for kids who are at risk of developing learning disabilities and other problems that have been linked to mercury poisoning," the Sierra Club said in an e-mail to CNN. "This is a big public health victory, 20 years in the making. It's one of the most important anti-pollution measures in recent memory."

Mary Anne Hitt, director of the Beyond Coal Campaign, said, "As a mom, I'm especially excited to know that millions of mothers and babies will now be protected from mercury poisoning. We all teach our kids the simple rule that if you make a mess you should clean it up -- and now polluters will have to follow that same rule."

The new rule requires that the vast majority of mercury contained in coal be captured and prevented from releasing into the air when burned for energy, and would require operators to shut down or upgrade the least efficient power plants.

Power plant operators have three years to comply with the new standards, but plant operators may be granted additional time to install the necessary emissions improvement technologies if they are able to demonstrated a valid need.

Once airborne, mercury enters bodies of water through precipitation, becomes methylmercury, and accumulates in the food chain.

The EPA and the Food and Drug Administration jointly recommend that pregnant women and young children limit their consumption of fish and shellfish to two meals a week because of the methylmercury contamination.

EPA rules target mercury pollution, toxics from power plants
By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

The Environmental Protection Agency released far-reaching air pollution regulations Wednesday, 21 years after they were first mandated by Congress and six days after they were signed by the agency.

The rules require coal- and oil-fired power plants to lower emissions of 84 different toxic chemicals to levels no higher than those emitted by the cleanest 12% of plants. Companies have three years to achieve the standards, and EPA has made clear a fourth year and perhaps even more time are also available to them.

"We're delighted," says Janice Nolen of the American Lung Association. "After waiting 21 years, it looks like we may actually have a rule that will help to save 11,000 lives a year and reduce exposure all across the country to a bunch of really toxic substances."

"It's hard to overstate the significance of this rule," says John Walke of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group. "This is a generational achievement, that mark's America cleaning up dirty power plants once and for all."

The EPA rules govern multiple toxics, including mercury, arsenic, nickel, selenium and cyanide.

Power plants are responsible for half of the mercury and more than 75% of the acid gas emissions in the United States, the EPA says. The EPA estimates that about half the nation's power plants already have pollution control technologies in place. This rule will "level the playing field" in the agency's words, by ensuring that the rest, about 40% of all coal-fired plants, take similar steps.

By EPA estimates, the rules will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year, as well as preventing 130,000 cases of childhood asthma symptoms.

Coal-fired burners are the main concern of the regulation, as oil-fired burners are less popular given high oil prices. There are about 1,100 coal-fired burners being used at 600 power plants nationwide, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson told USA TODAY. Currently, 12% of the nation's coal-fired power plants already meet the standards, by definition. Another 48% have some if not all of the necessary technologies in place to meet the standards.

The remaining 40% "have done nothing, they have no controls, they emit unlimited amounts of pollutants, they have no technology in place," Jackson says. These plants are the focus of the regulations.

But the industry argues the cost of meeting these rules could bring economic hardship.

American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity President and CEO Steve Miller said Wednesday. "The EPA is out of touch with the hard reality facing American families and businesses. This latest rule will destroy jobs, raise the cost of energy and could even make electricity less reliable."

The coalition plans to study the new rule but says it may risk jobs and access to affordable electricity. If so, it will ask Congress to "step in," Miller says. "People's jobs, their family budgets and their access to affordable electricity are at stake."

There was a furious eleventh-hour push by some utility groups in the past two weeks "to try to kill this, but in the end too many pieces of the power industry were saying, 'We can do this,' " says Jim Pew of Earthjustice, a public interest law group.

Advertisements suggesting that the United States will experience power blackouts because of the new rules "are greatly overblown," EPA's Jackson says. Modeling done by EPA, Congress and the Department of Energy all suggest there's no danger of that.

"This is just a scare tactic," she says. Utilities are crassly "asking Americans to choose between mercury in their and their children's bodies, and power." That's not what's happening, Jackson says.

There's nothing in the rule requiring these plants to be shut down, only that they need to be cleaned up, she says. Analysis has shown that these plants are, on average, 50 years old.

"It's just like your car. You have to make a determination of how much you want to put into a clunker when it starts to see the end of its useful life. Companies will have to make business decisions," Jackson says.

Bloomberg
EPA Issues Arsenic, Mercury Cap for U.S. Coal-Fired Power Plants
By Mark Drajem - Dec 21, 2011 2:58 PM ET

President Barack Obama’s administration issued the first U.S. standards to cut mercury and other toxic emissions from coal-fired power plants, winning praise from health advocates who say the step is long overdue.

The Environmental Protection Agency rule, the most expensive under review by Obama’s administration, would force producers such as Southern Co. (SO) to install pollution-control devices or close coal plants and substitute natural gas or wind generation. Most of the 1,100 U.S. plants already comply.

“This has been 20 years in the making,” Lisa Jackson, the EPA administrator, said today at Children’s National Medical Center in Washington. “This is a great victory for public health, especially for the health of our children.”

The rule, proposed in March, caused a split within the electric industry, with companies such as Atlanta-based Southern and American Electric Power Co. (AEP) saying it would force them to retire needed plants. Proponents such as Chicago-based Exelon Corp. (EXC) say they spent billions of dollars on pollution controls and natural-gas plants, anticipating new rules, and want competitors to make the same investments.

The EPA says the standard, estimated to cost $9.6 billion a year, will save lives and create $90 billion in annual benefits. It will also boost employment as power producers install scrubbing systems made by companies such as Babcock & Wilcox Co. (BWC) or Alstom SA (ALO), the agency said.

Mercury, Acid Gases

The EPA proposal incorporates three separate limits: one for mercury, a second for acid gases and a third for particulate matter, which is used to target emissions of metals such as chromium, selenium and cadmium.

In its March proposal, it said the regulation could prevent 17,000 premature deaths from toxic emissions. Today it lowered that estimate to 11,000, according to the statement. Jackson said improved estimates for benefits from a rule to combat pollution across state borders leaves the mercury standard with fewer toxics to remove.

The changes announced today include easing off on mandatory controls for particulate matter, dispatching with pollution caps when plants are starting up or shutting down, and allowing companies greater leeway to average mercury emissions across units. Those changes will save utilities about $1 billion annually, EPA said in a fact sheet.

Presidential Memorandum

The rule was accompanied by a presidential memorandum that directs the EPA to use authority in the law to give power companies more time beyond the three-year deadline to install equipment or shut old plants. The EPA said in its statement that it wants to make “broadly available” a fourth year, and will offer more time to deal with local reliability issues. In most cases that extra time will not be necessary, the EPA said.

Critics say the rule will force plant closures, raising the cost of electricity and endangering the reliability of the distribution grid. In addition, they have said the health benefits the EPA is claiming are overstated, as they have already been accounted for in previous pollution measures.

“It will increase the cost of power, undermining the international competitiveness of almost two dozen manufacturing industries, and it will reduce employment upstream in the mining sectors,” Scott Segal, a lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani LLP in Washington representing companies such as Southern, said in an e-mail before the rule was released. “Given that the rule is one of the most expensive air rules ever, the American public deserves better.”

Pollution Controls

About 40 percent of coal-fired power plants don’t have the pollution controls necessary to comply with these rules, according to the EPA.

A separate EPA measure on power-plant emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide that float across state lines is set to take effect in 2012, and is being challenged by power companies in court. This rule is likely to face challenges in court and in Congress as well.

The two rules together are the most far-reaching actions to curb pollution since Clean Air Act was amended in 1990, according to the American Lung Association.

This is a “huge victory for public health,” Albert A. Rizzo, chief of pulmonary and critical-care medicine at Christiana Care Health System in Wilmington, Delaware, and the association’s national volunteer chairman, said in the EPA’s statement.

Reuters: U.S. rolls out tough rules on coal plant pollution
By Ayesha Rascoe and Timothy Gardner

WASHINGTON | Wed Dec 21, 2011 4:00pm EST

(Reuters) - The Obama administration on Wednesday unveiled the first-ever standards to slash mercury emissions from coal-fired plants, a move aimed at protecting public health that critics say will kill jobs as plants shut down.

Facing fierce opposition from industry groups and lawmakers from coal-intensive states, the Environmental Protection Agency said the benefits of the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, or MATS, will greatly outweigh the costs.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson revealed the rules, which have been about 20 years in the making, at a Washington, D.C. children's hospital. Mercury can harm the nervous systems of developing fetuses and infants and can enter the food stream through contaminated fish.

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health," said Jackson, whose agency hopes to start enforcing the rules over the next several years.

While the rule mostly adhered to the tough proposal on mercury, arsenic, chromium and other pollutants made earlier in the year, there were some differences.

The rules will cost utilities about $9.6 billion annually, down more than $1 billion from the EPA's earlier estimate due to "flexibilities" that were added to the final regulation, the agency said.

The EPA also said it will push permitting authorities in the states and cities to make "broadly available" a fourth year for polluters to invest in technology needed to cut the emissions.

One of a raft of clean air standards the agency is launching, the mercury standards have divided the power industry.

Companies including Exelon and NextEra that generate most of their power with "clean" fuel sources such as nuclear, natural gas and renewables have supported the mercury standards, while those that get most of their power from coal, including American Electric Power and Southern have vigorously fought them.

The standards pleased environmentalists and public health advocates, an important part of President Barack Obama's voter base, who slammed his decision in September to delay a landmark rule on smog emissions.

DRIVING PLANT CLOSINGS

While the EPA stressed the flexibility of the final rules, power industry lobbyists said the agency still did not allow enough time for compliance.

Scott Segal, a lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani, said the rules will result in the loss of more than 1.4 million jobs by 2020 as utilities are forced to shut old coal-fired power plants. He estimated that for every temporary job created in technologies to clean up power plants four higher paying jobs, often union ones, will be lost.

"The bottom line: this rule is the most expensive air rule that EPA has ever proposed in terms of direct costs," Segal said. "It is certainly the most extensive intervention into the power market and job market that EPA has ever attempted to implement."

Rob Patrylak, a managing director of Black & Veatch, a consulting, engineering and construction company, said of all the EPA clean air rules, the MATS rule will force the largest number of coal-plant retirements. Unlike other recent clean air standards, such the Cross State Air Pollution Rule that seeks to cut emissions that move downwind from power plants, the MATS rule does not allow utilities to trade pollution credits to comply.

"MATS is really what's driving the decision," for companies to shut some of their coal plants, he said.

Energy analysts have said the EPA's mercury rule, along with the cross state, cooling water and coal ash rules could shut up to 70,000 megawatts of coal-fired generation.

The EPA estimated that MATS will save $90 billion in healthcare costs by 2016 as technology to cut mercury emissions also reduces emissions of fine particulates, which can damage hearts and lungs. When combined with other EPA rules, thousands of lives will also be saved, it said.

Environmentalists praised the administration for pushing through tough rules. "EPA will take a significant step toward cleaner air, and we hope to see more progress to protect public health from air pollutants, including greenhouse gases, in the New Year," said Kevin Kennedy, US climate director at the World Resources Institute, said in an email.

Republican lawmakers quickly pounced on the new mercury rules, vowing to stop the regulations.

James Inhofe, the senior Republican senator on the Environment Committee, said he would try to overturn the rule using a "joint resolution of disapproval," a tool that faces an uphill battle in the Democratic-controlled Senate. Inhofe called the rule "a thinly veiled electricity tax" that will hurt jobs.

Jackson, who spoke during her announcement about her two sons' struggles with asthma, said she was not surprised that lawmakers were threatening to derail the regulations, but ultimately these rules were long overdue.

"These standards are 22 years in making. They are what the American people deserve after waiting so long," Jackson said. "My belief is that if we started hiring engineers instead of lobbyists and...scientists instead of lawyers, we would be able to do our job for the American people."

LA Times
EPA issues strong limits on mercury emissions from smokestacks
By Neela Banerjee
December 21, 2011, 10:35 a.m.

WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration on Wednesday announced a tough new rule to limit emissions of mercury, arsenic and other toxic substances from sources such as power plants, a landmark measure that could prevent up to 11,000 premature deaths annually, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Though mercury is a known neurotoxin that can be profoundly harmful to children and pregnant women, there has never been a federal rule setting a standard for its release into the air from power plants. The current rule has been more than 20 years in the making, stymied repeatedly by objections from coal-

burning utilities -- the biggest source of mercury and other acid gases -- and about the cost of installing pollution-control equipment.

The new regulation does not differ markedly in its rigorous emissions targets and timetable from a draft rule proposed in March, despite fierce lobbying to change it. It gives utilities three years to install pollution control equipment called scrubbers, with the opportunity for extensions from regulators on a case-by-case basis.

The rule follows on the heels of several Obama administration decisions to shelve environmental standards to mollify a sharply critical business community, including a high-profile decision this summer to halt new standards to cut smog. The long-awaited rule governing air toxins is sure to rile powerful utilities and their congressional allies who have doggedly lobbied the administration over the last few weeks to weaken or delay the standards.

Said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said in a statement: “The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance.”

Environmentalists applauded the step as a historic leap in efforts to curtail air pollution. “We can breathe easier today,” said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in an emailed statement. “Dirty coal-fired power plants will have to clean up the toxic soup of emissions that is polluting our air and making people sick, especially children. This critical update to the Clean Air Act will reduce child developmental delays, asthma attacks, heart attacks, and cancer; and save tens of thousands of lives.”

Scott Segal, director of the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council, an industry lobbying group, said the sweeping implications of the new rule mean that utilities would not accept them easily.

Under the new rule, power plants can emit 1.2 pounds of mercury per million BTUs of energy produced. Industry had sought a limit of 1.4 pounds. But the EPA arrived at its figure based on a formula set out under the Clean Air Act, and analysts said the agency could not deviate from it.

“The final rule appears to be pretty close to the proposed rule, which is unfortunate. The rule suffers from statistical errors, inaccurate technological assumptions, and inadequate economic and reliability analysis. Given that the rule is one of the most expensive air rules ever, the American public deserves better."

Companies would have three years to clean up their emissions of mercury and about 70 other toxic substances, and utilities could appeal for at least one more year as they install the necessary equipment. Much of industry has argued that the timetable is too tight and could lead to rolling blackouts. One group,

the American Public Power Assn., told the White House that its members needed more than seven years to comply with the mercury rule.

About a dozen states have already approved rules to cut mercury and other toxic substances. A recent study by air quality regulators in the Northeast showed that Massachusetts' aggressive efforts since 1998 to reduce mercury emissions have slashed emissions by more than 90%. Industry has argued that the health benefits of reducing mercury through a federal standard are overstated.

But the estimated public health effects had played a considerable role so far in getting the administration to stick to standards it proposed in March, environmentalists said. Power plants account for about half of mercury emissions and more than 70% of acid gases.

People get exposed to mercury mainly by eating contaminated fish. Mercury exposure damages the developing brains of fetuses and children.

The EPA estimates that by 2016, the proposed rules could avert 4,700 heart attacks a year and prevent 130,000 cases of childhood asthma symptoms.

The Hill E2 Wire
EPA unveils rules limiting mercury, other power plant toxins
By Andrew Restuccia
12/21/11 01:30 PM ET

The Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday unveiled highly anticipated national standards to limit power plant output of mercury and other toxic air pollutants that have been linked to developmental disorders and childhood asthma.

The long-delayed final standards have been the subject of a ferocious lobbying and public relations battle. And it's a fight that could spill onto the presidential campaign trail at a time when GOP candidates routinely accuse Obama of pursuing an overzealous green agenda.

The regulations are a victory for environmental groups, who are still recovering from the bitter disappointment of the White House's decision to scuttle much-anticipated smog regulations. But they face vehement opposition from Republicans and industry groups, who argue the rules will harm the economy, force the closure of coal-fired power plants and threaten the reliability of the country's power grid.

The administration took pains Wednesday to limit the political fallout from the regulations. President Obama intends to issue a memorandum later Wednesday directing EPA to ensure the standards impose the least possible cost on industry and don't threaten electric reliability.

EPA said Wednesday that the regulations – which require coal- and oil-fired power plants to install technology to reduce harmful air pollution – will offer massive public health benefits at limited cost to industry.

The agency estimates that the standards will prevent 11,000 premature deaths, 4,700 heart attacks and 130,000 cases of childhood asthma per year.

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health– and especially for the health of our children," EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said in a statement.

"With these standards that were two decades in the making, EPA is rounding out a year of incredible progress on clean air in America with another action that will benefit the American people for years to come," Jackson said.

In an effort to drive home the regulations' health benefits, Jackson is set to unveil the standards Wednesday at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. She was joined at the event by officials from the American Lung Association and other supporters of the standards.

The agency mde an effort to show that the power industry is not uniformly against the standards. Paul Allen, a senior official with power giant Constellation Energy, is slated to appear at Wednesday's rollout.

EPA said that more than half of the country's existing coal-fired power plants have already installed the necessary technology to meet the new standards. About 40 percent of the country's coal-fired plants will be required to update their facilities under the rules, according to the agency.

Plant operators have three years to comply with the standards and EPA encouraged states to "make a fourth year broadly available for technology installations" in an effort to stem criticism of the regulations. The agency also said it would allow more time to comply with the standards on a case-by-case basis if electric reliability issues arise on a localized level.

EPA also said the regulations will help create 46,000 temporary construction jobsand 8,000 permanent utility jobs.

Environmental groups cheered the new standards Wednesday.

“We can breathe easier today. After decades of industry-induced delay, the Environmental Protection Agency did exactly what it was designed to do: look out for our health and our environment,” said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in a statement.

“Dirty coal-fired power plants will have to clean up the toxic soup of emissions that is polluting our air and making people sick, especially children,” she said.

The rules come over the protest of House Republicans, who shepherded legislation through their chamber in September that would indefinitely delay the rules and force EPA to rewrite them.

Major utilities with coal-fired generation like American Electric Power and Southern Company have also fought the standards, holding a series of meetings with White House Office of Management and Budget officials as recently as mid-December warning the rules will force layoffs and hurt power reliability by forcing the closure of a massive number of plants.

Industry groups blasted the regulations Wednesday. Scott Segal, Director of the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council, a group of utilities, said the rules will “undermine job creation in the United States,” force the retirement of power plants and increase the cost of electricity.

“The bottom line: this rule is the most expensive air rule that EPA has ever proposed in terms of direct costs,” Segal said in a statement. “It is certainly the most extensive intervention into the power market and job market that EPA has ever attempted to implement.”

The Obama administration has pushed back in recent weeks on allegations that the rules will cause power outages. The Energy Department issued a report earlier this month that said the regulations will not threaten the reliability of the country’s electric grid.

The regulations, which were first mandated in 1990 as part of a series of amendments to the Clean Air Act, will reduce toxic air pollutants like mercury, arsenic, acid gas, nickel, selenium, and cyanide. The air toxics have been shown to cause developmental problems in children as well as respiratory problems like asthma and bronchitis.

EPA had been ordered to complete the rule Friday under a court-ordered deadline, but delayed public rollout until this week.

National Journal
EPA Unveils Long-Awaited Mercury Rule
By Amy Harder
December 21, 2011 | 2:31 p.m.

Appearing at Washington's Children's Hospital with public health leaders at her side, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson on Wednesday unveiled the nation's first-ever national standards for mercury and other toxic air pollution from power plants.

The sweeping regulations—mandated by Congress in 1990 and delayed by prolonged litigation, lobbying, and legislative battles—will require utilities to cut at least 90 percent of their emissions of mercury, a neurotoxin known to cause brain damage and other health problems, particularly in developing fetuses and young children.

"The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards will help protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance," Jackson said.

EPA says the rule will prevent up to 11,000 premature deaths and prevent thousands of respiratory illnesses, which could translate into $90 billion in health and economic benefits a year.

"EPA estimates that manufacturing, engineering, installing, and maintaining the pollution controls to meet these standards will provide employment for thousands, potentially including 46,000 short-term construction jobs and 8,000 long-term utility jobs," according to the agency.

Critics are bound to take issue with those numbers, which ignore the likely job losses in the coal-utility sector. Indeed, utilities that burn coal, such as American Electric Power and Southern Company, will be affected the most since coal is the dirtiest fule used to generate electricity and accounts for 99 percent of the mercury pollution from the power sector. Coal is also the cheapest and most abundant fuel source, though, providing nearly 50 percent of the country's electricity.

Consumer groups praised the new rules. "The health benefits of this rule are clear, and today's announcement follows the example set by the Clean Air Act by protecting public health in a cost effective manner," said Shannon Baker-Branstetter of Consumers Union.

"Exposure to air pollution and toxic chemicals can cause asthma and heart attacks, harm those suffering from respiratory illness, and in some cases lead to death," said Alan Baker, interim executive director of the American Public Health Association. "Implementing these critically needed standards could mean the difference between a chronic debilitating, expensive illness or healthy life for hundreds of thousands of American children and adults."

Wall Street Journal
EPA Sets Deeps Cuts in Power-Plant Emissions
BY RYAN TRACY AND DEBORAH SOLOMON
December 21, 2011

WASHINGTON—The Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday made final new limits on emissions from power-plant smokestacks, requiring deep cuts in toxic pollution at hundreds of generating units that burn coal or fuel oil to make electricity.

The agency said the rules, set to take effect in about 60 days, will prevent up to 11,000 premature deaths each year.

The rules will also cost about $10 billion annually while power companies install pollution controls or shut down aging plants that can't comply, and they are expected to reshape the power sector as companies switch to cleaner-burning fuels such as natural gas.

The Obama administration, eager for a victory on its environmental resume after a delay in a separate rule on smog-forming ozone pollution earlier this year, announced the rule Wednesday at a Washington ceremony. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson was flanked by public-health advocates and some power-industry representatives.

The new standards "will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance," Ms. Jackson said in a statement.

The administration held its ground on the air-toxins rule despite objections from congressional Republicans and some power companies that said the rules will go too far, too quickly and would potentially put the reliability of the electric grid at risk as plants close down. Efforts to delay the rules in Congress over the past year have failed.

In a nod to the reliability concerns, the EPA said Wednesday it was encouraging state authorities to allow four years if necessary for companies to install retrofits at plants to comply with the rules, instead of the statutory three. If even more time is needed, the agency said the rule provides "a well-defined pathway to address any localized reliability problems should they arise."

Several Republican lawmakers said Wednesday they were preparing legislation that would block the rules or allow a "safety valve" for plants that can't comply in time. The Edison Electric Institute, the utility industry's main trade group, said the EPA made useful changes but still was creating "the most expensive rule in the agency's history."

Those gestures fall short of the industry's requests. Power companies had wanted an automatic four-year compliance time frame and a presidential executive order to secure a fifth year, if necessary, to keep the grid online.

The rules will make power companies slash emissions of gases that contribute to soot and acid rain and can worsen heart and lung problems. They also require cuts of mercury and other toxic metals. The agency said about 60% of affected power plants already comply with the rules.

In a related memorandum to Ms. Jackson, President Barack Obama directed the EPA to be flexible "where justified" in enforcing the new rule.

Mr. Obama said the fourth year should "broadly available to sources, consistent with law," and should be invoked "expeditiously where justified."

The president also said the EPA should "promote early, coordinated, and orderly planning and execution of the measures needed to implement" the rule.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution
EPA issues mercury-reduction standards for power plants

By Kristi E. Swartz
December 21, 2011

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released new power plant emissions rules designed to remove mercury and other toxins from the air.

The agency said reducing toxic pollutants would cut thousands of cases of chronic bronchitis, heart attacks, aggravated asthma and other health problems.

Georgia Power and other utilities have said the new rules would cause them to close or significantly alter several coal-fired power plants, costing time, money and jobs. Complying with the new regulations could cost Georgia Power $741 million to nearly $3 billion and lead it to close or refit six additional coal or oil-fired plants by 2015, the utility has said.

Customers eventually will pay for these costs in the form of higher electricity bills.

The regulations have been part of a political tug-of-war between the utility industry and environmentalists. Utilities have lobbied heavily for the EPA to make changes to the proposed rule, released in March.

A small drop of mercury can contaminate a lake and the fish that live in it, according to a report from Environment Georgia. All 50 states have advisories warning women and children not to eat local fish because they may be contaminated with mercury, the report said.

The EPA's rules were signed Dec. 13 but were not made public until just before a news conference at 2 p.m. Wednesday. Environmental and industry groups already had lined up their prepared statements praising or chastising the rules.

"The EPA is out of touch with the hard reality facing American families and businesses. This latest rule will destroy jobs, raise the cost of energy and could even make electricity less reliable," said Steve Miller, President and CEO of the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity.

St. Louis Today
EPA finalizes mercury limits for coal plants
BY JEFFREY TOMICH
Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Read more: http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/epa-finalizes-mercury-limits-for-coal-plants/article_0d614802-2c01-11e1-befc-0019bb30f31a.html#ixzz1hDEMDXHo

Federal regulators on Wednesday announced landmark new rules that put nationwide limits on the amount of mercury and and other toxic pollutants emitted by power plants.

The regulations were finalized by the Environmental Protection Agency under a court deadline. They were proposed in March, re-igniting a vigorous debate between the power industry and environmental and public health advocates.

The rules replace less aggressive limits on mercury established by the George W. Bush administration that were later thrown out by the federal courts. The Bush rules had established a cap-and-trade program that allowed utilities that reduced emissions to could sell credits to those that didn't.

Under the new regulations, coal-burning power plants will have up to four years to slash mercury emissions and make deep cuts in the release of acid gases and metals like arsenic and chromium for which there are currently no national standards.

The rules "will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance," EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said in a statement.

The agency said pollution control technology needed to meet the standards are widely available and already in use at more than half of the nation's coal-fired power plants.

The rules will bring changes to states like Missouri, where there are presently no state-imposed limits on mercury emissions. Illinois, meanwhile, put more stringent mercury standards in place several years ago.

The EPA rules on mercury come just months after the agency finalized another set of tough regulations that require steep reductions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions in 27 eastern states, including Missouri, beginning next year.

EPA estimates the mercury and air toxics regulations will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths each year and help avoid thousands of heart attacks and cases of asthma and acute bronchitis in children.

StateImpact Texas
New Rules Approved for Pollution from Coal Plants
December 21, 2011

In a move the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is calling “historic,” new rules were approved today that mandate reduced emissions of mercury and other pollutants from U.S. coal power plants. In a statement released today, the agency says that these are the first national standards that “will slash emissions of these dangerous pollutants by relying on widely available, proven pollution controls that are already in use at more than half of the nation’s coal-fired power plants.”

The agency estimates that the new rules “will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year.” It also says that the rules will reduce childhood asthma symptoms and result in less acute bronchitis in children.

“Power plants are the largest remaining source of several toxic air pollutants, including mercury, arsenic, cyanide, and a range of other dangerous pollutants,” the agency says. They “are responsible for half of the mercury and over 75 percent of the acid gas emissions in the United States.”

About forty percent of Texas’ power comes from coal, and several companies in the state will have to upgrade their plants in order to comply with the new rules. At the Fayette Power Project in La Grange, Texas, the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) and Austin Energy have spent $400 million on upgrades to scrubbers at the plant, but they’ll have to spend more to comply with the new rules.

“We’re evaluating it right now, there is definitely a cost to remove mercury,” Andrew Valencia, Manager of Power and Gas Operations for LCRA told StateImpact Texas today. “But the technologies that will be deployed will depend on what the final rules are.”

The EPA is giving three years for companies to comply with the new standards and is “also encouraging permitting authorities to make a fourth year broadly available for technology installations.” In short, the agency does not expect any power outages to result because of the new rules. A recent independent study by the Associated Press reached the same conclusion.

NY Times (Green Blog)
E.P.A. Issues Limits on Mercury Emissions
By JOHN M. BRODER
December 21, 2011, 2:00 PM

The Environmental Protection Agency introduced new standards on Wednesday sharply limiting emissions of mercury and other toxic pollutants from the nation’s 1,400 coal- and oil-burning power plants.

If and when the new rule takes effect, it will be the first time the federal government has enforced limits on mercury, arsenic, acid gases and other poisonous and carcinogenic chemicals emitted by the burning of fossil fuels.

Lisa P. Jackson, the E.P.A. administrator, said that the regulations, which have taken more than 20 years to formulate, would save thousands of lives and return financial benefits many times their estimated $9.6 billion annual cost.

“By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health – and especially for the health of our children,” Ms. Jackson said.

President Obama, who in September rejected a proposed E.P.A. rule covering smog-causing emissions as too burdensome to industry, said he was fully supportive of the new regulation. He directed the agency to ensure that companies were given sufficient time and flexibility to meet the new rule.

He said the new rule, formally known as the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, “represents a major step forward in my administration’s efforts to protect public health and the environment.” (The White House released a video in which the president discusses the rules.)

A number of power plant operators are likely to challenge the new rules in court, saying they are too expensive and will force the premature closing of scores of power plants, eliminating hundreds of thousands of jobs and threatening the supply of electricity in some parts of the country.

Scott H. Segal, who represents utilities that will be affected by the new rule, said that the E.P.A. was playing down the costs and double-counting the benefits. “The bottom line,” he said in an analysis of the regulation, “this rule is the most expensive air rule that E.P.A. has ever proposed in terms of direct costs. It is certainly the most extensive intervention into the power market and job market that E.P.A. has ever attempted to implement.”

Environmental advocates challenged Mr. Segal’s analysis, and his views are not universally shared in the power industry. Ralph Izzo, the chief executive of Public Service Enterprise Group, the parent of New Jersey’s largest electric utility, said that his company had spent $1.3 billion to bring his plants into compliance with New Jersey’s air quality rules, which are as stringent as the new federal standard. He said that other utilities had had more than enough notice to clean up their plants in advance of the federal rule announced on Wednesday.

He said the E.P.A. action was “long overdue.” He noted that the Clean Air Act, under which the new standards are issued, gives enough flexibility to allow all power generators to come into compliance without any threat to the reliability of electric supply.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin, harming the nervous systems of fetuses and young children and causing lifelong developmental problems. Other pollutants covered by the new rule, including dioxin, can cause cancer, premature death, heart disease, and asthma.

Power plants generally will have up to four years to comply, although waivers can be granted in individual cases to ensure that the lights stay on. The E.P.A. estimates that utilities will be forced to retire plants that currently provide less than one-half of 1 percent of the nation’s total generating capacity.

The rule is the first national one to put limits on emissions of mercury and other toxic gases from power plants, although more than a dozen states have already imposed such rules on plants within their borders. The George W. Bush administration proposed a rule covering mercury emissions, but environmental and health groups successfully blocked it in court on the ground that it did not meet the minimum standards of the Clean Air Act.

The new federal rule is not based on simple numbers, like pounds per year or per megawatt-hour, but on a scale based on the performance of other power plants; uncontrolled sources will have to do as well as the best-performing sources do now. The rule, in effect, specifies a group of proven cleanup technologies – such as scrubbers or carbon injection systems – rather than precise emissions goals.

Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the senior Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, vowed to block the new regulation.

“Sadly, this rule isn’t about public health,” he said in a statement. “It is a thinly veiled electricity tax that continues the Obama administration’s war on affordable energy and is the latest in an unprecedented barrage of regulations that make up E.P.A.’s job-killing regulatory agenda.”

The E.P.A. said that when the rules are fully put into effect, they will prevent 90 percent of the mercury in coal burned in power plants from being emitted into the air and reduce 88 percent of acid gas emissions from power plants.

The rule will apply to about 1,400 units that generate electricity by burning coal or oil at 600 separate power plants. (Some have more than one power-generation unit.) About half the coal boilers lack what the E.P.A. calls “advanced pollution control equipment”; some are more than 50 years old.

Other relatively large mercury sources, like medical waste incinerators and municipal waste combusters, are already controlled and have released their emissions by 95 percent, according to the E.P.A. Some of the reduction was from simple steps like ceasing to incinerate batteries.

The E.P.A. estimated that the rules would eliminate “up to 11,000 premature deaths” per year, along with thousands of heart attacks, asthma attacks and emergency room visits.

The impact on the electric system is difficult to quantify, in part because the administration is moving forward on two other major rules affecting power plants, one for plants east of the Rockies that send pollution across state borders, and another governing discharges of warm water. Plant owners may calculate that it is cheaper to build a new plant burning natural gas than to upgrade an old coal-burner.

Susan F. Tierney, a consultant who was an assistant secretary of energy for policy during the Clinton administration and a utility regulator in Massachusetts, said that for plants that were “on the margin” financially, the cross-state rule and the new mercury rule might push them under.

Plants with stronger economics might upgrade to control mercury and other hazardous pollutants, she said, because the water rule was still several years in the future.

Ms. Tierney said the mercury rule was the biggest E.P.A. rule on power plants since the mid-1990s, although other changes could be coming. “Under existing rules, it’s really the next big action-forcing regulation,’’ she said. Eventually, she said, E.P.A. regulation of greenhouse gases could have a broader impact, but that rule is still being written.

The Courier-Journal
EPA mercury limits expected on coal plants
12:31 PM, Dec. 21, 2011

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is expected Wednesday to make final its rule aimed at cutting emissions of mercury and other toxic chemicals from coal-fired power plants.

The agency has scheduled a 2 p.m. press conference at a Washington, D.C., hospital, promising a major Clean Air Act announcement, and environmentalists and industry officials who closely monitor the EPA said they expect action on mercury and other toxic-air emissions to be unveiled.

If the agency's final rule is as strong as the one it proposed in March, it would reduce mercury emissions from power plants by as much as 91 percent over the next three or four years, saving lives and reducing health-care bills, while costing the nation's utilities about $11 billion annually and driving electricity rates higher.

The new rule would replace Bush-era regulations thrown out by the federal courts that had relied on a cap-and-trade strategy, where utilities that made cuts could sell credits to those that didn't. At the time, the Bush administration predicted its rule would reduce mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants 70 percent over 13 years

EPA in March said its rule would apply to all power plants and other industrial sources of mercury emissions, while also seeking to toxic air pollutants such as arsenic, lead, chromium and acid gases.

The rule is expected to have particular impact in Kentucky and Indiana, where coal-fired power plants supply more than 90 percent of the states' electricity.

Environmentalists and some medical doctors have called the Louisville area a mercury "hot spot" because of its concentration of coal-fired plants. Two are within the city limits, and another is across the Ohio River in New Albany, Ind.

The Plain Dealer
U.S. EPA issues tough mercury and other toxic emission standards; some coal-burning power plants may close
Wednesday, December 21, 2011, 2:32 PM

By John Funk

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) today issued the first rules regulating power plant smoke stack emissions of mercury and other toxic metals.

The rules will probably force utilities that rely on coal-fired boilers, including FirstEnergy Corp. and Columbus-based American Electric Power, to shut down older, smaller power plants because installing clean-up equipment would not only be costly but would also reduce the output of the plants.

Among FirstEnergy power plants that face upgrades or closures are Lake Shore, Ashtabula and Bay Shore.

The standards will regulate power plant emissions of mercury and other toxic pollutants such as arsenic, acid gas, nickel, selenium, and cyanide.

The pollution controls to eliminate these materials are proven and widely available, said EPA administrator Lisa Jackson. But only about half of the nation's 1,100 coal-burning utility power plants are equipped with technology today.

The impact of the new rules on consumer power prices has yet to be determined. EPA estimates that the new safeguards will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year and prevent about 130,000 cases of childhood asthma symptoms and about 6,300 fewer cases of acute bronchitis among children each year.

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health- and especially for the health of our children," said Jackson.

Bangor Daily News
Collins, Snowe urged to support clean air rules
By Jackie Farwell, BDN Staff
Posted Dec. 19, 2011, at 5:44 p.m.

PORTLAND, Maine — A group of doctors, sportsmen, scientists and parents led by the American Lung Association gathered Monday to urge Maine's senators to support clean air legislation.

The coalition called on Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe to back tougher federal rules on mercury and air pollution from power plants and oppose efforts to delay stricter emissions standards for industrial boilers.

At a press conference, Mark Conley of Raymond said he sometimes has to keep his asthmatic son, Jake, indoors because air pollution compromises the 12-year-old's breathing.

"Do we want our kids walking around in the future with masks on?" Conley said.

The Environmental Protection Agency is expected this week to unveil first-ever national standards for mercury and other toxic pollutants released from power plant smokestacks. The agency says the standards will keep 91 percent of the mercury in coal from entering the air, preventing an estimated 11,000 heart attacks and 120,000 asthma attacks annually by 2016.

“While many parts of the country rely on coal power, the health effects from this relatively inexpensive resource are borne by the people of Maine,” Snowe said in a statement. “It is unacceptable that these costs are simply transferred from one region to another and that is why I have long supported reducing mercury pollution with cost-effective technologies.”

Art Cerullo, a member of the American Lung Association of Maine board, said at the press conference that Maine’s senators hold the key to preventing out-of-state polluters from dirtying Maine’s air. Behind him, an actor dressed as Santa placed gift boxes labeled “healthy air” and “healthy kids” into a stocking while a man dressed as the Grinch replaced them with chunks of coal.

“But it’s not just about health,” Cerullo said. “It’s about our ability to create jobs and grow Maine’s economy. And let’s face it, when you think of Maine as Vacationland, you don’t think of dirty, unhealthy air.”

Collins co-sponsored a bill this summer to postpone implementation of the new industrial boiler regulations, giving the EPA 15 months to review the issue and extending compliance deadlines from three years to five.

Pulp and paper industry officials in Maine have said the plants are crucial to their businesses and that the regulations are costly to comply with and overly strict. Opponents argue the delay will allow harmful toxins into the air.

Collins’ bipartisan legislation now has more than 40 co-sponsors and will give the EPA time to analyze the best ways to implement the standards, known as Boiler MACT rules, according to Kevin Kelley, a spokesman for Collins.

“Maine has lost more than a third of its manufacturing jobs during the past decade, and Sen. Collins remains committed to helping ensure that the Boiler MACT rules are crafted to protect public health without harming the forest products industry, which is the lifeblood of many small, rural communities,” Kelley said in a statement.

Time (EcoCentric Blog)
December 21, 2011

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health– and especially for the health of our children. The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance."

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator LISA JACKSON, in a statement announcing the release of the EPA's long-awaited rules on mercury and other air toxics. The regulations—which have been in the works for two decades—are the first to restrict emissions of mercury, a potent neurotoxin, from power plants. According to the EPA, the new rules—with which coal-fired power plants will have at least three years to comply—will prevent at least 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year, along with 130,000 childhood asthma symptoms and 6,300 fewer cases of acute bronchitis in children.

The Talk Radio News Service
EPA Issues New Air Pollution Rules
Wednesday, December 21, 2011 At 2:40PM

The Obama administration announced Wednesday new rules aimed at reducing air pollution caused by coal power plants.

The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards unveiled today are designed to curb emissions via a series of pollution controls.

According to a news release, "the new safeguards will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year. The standards will also help America's children grow up healthier – preventing 130,000 cases of childhood asthma symptoms and about 6,300 fewer cases of acute bronchitis among children each year."

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health– and especially for the health of our children," said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson. "The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance."

The EPA estimates that "the two rules are estimated to prevent up to 46,000 premature deaths, 540,000 asthma attacks among children, 24,500 emergency room visits and hospital admissions." The administration also believes that the new standards will net the nation's economy $90 billion per year.

Critics of the new standards, however, say that they will result in job loss and higher electricty bills for customers.

Power plant lobbyist Scott Segal told MSNBC that “this rule is the most expensive air rule that EPA has ever proposed in terms of direct costs.”

“Much is made of the current debate over extending the payroll tax holiday,” Segal said. “The irony is that a middle class family may end up giving that entire tax benefit back in the form of higher utility bills.”

Think Progress
On Fox News, Ed Whitfield Denies ‘Any Benefit’ To Babies And Pregnant Women From Reducing Mercury Levels
By Brad Johnson on Dec 21, 2011 at 2:38 pm

As U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administration Lisa Jackson announces the first-ever Clean Air Act rules to limit mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants, Republicans are already attacking this historic advance for public health. The health risks of this potent neurotoxin are enormously well-documented. Methylmercury from coal pollution accumulates in fish, poisoning pregnant women and small children. Mercury can harm children’s developing brains, including effects on memory, attention, language, and fine motor and visual spatial skills. But Republicans are willing to argue that the profits of the coal industry outweigh the well-being of America’s children.

“There are already strict regulations relating to mercury emissions,” Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-KY), the chair of the House energy and power subcommittee, falsely claimed in an interview today with Fox News. “Obviously whatever controls the EPA has in place are not working if our fish are tainted,” Fox’s Alisyn Camerota shot back. Whitfield then made the false claim that “there is not going to be any benefit from this new regulation in reducing mercury levels”:

CAMEROTA: As I’m sure you know, for the past years doctors have been advising pregnant women not to eat any fish when they are pregnant because the mercury levels are so high in fish. So what to do about this? Obviously whatever controls the EPA has in place are not working if our fish are tainted.

WHITFIELD: Well, let me just say this to you, the scientists that testified before our committee were unanimous in the view that there is not going to be any benefit from this new regulation in reducing mercury levels. All of the benefits were calculated from the reduction of particulate matter, which is already covered under ambient air quality standard regulations. This is about closing coal plants, and that’s precisely what it is about.

Whitfield and energy committee chair Fred Upton (R-MI) have assiduously avoided having medical experts testify about the EPA’s mercury rules, instead parading utility and coal industry officials before their committee to make exaggerated claims about the costs of upgrading power plants to protect children’s health. At one such hearing, Rep. Joe Barton denied the “medical negative” of mercury exposure.

The glimmer of fact in Whitfield's claims is that the health costs of mercury poisoning of our nation's children over decades of unlimited coal pollution are difficult to quantify. Mercury poisoning is rarely fatal and hard to detect, but causes undeniable, insidious developmental harm to fetuses and babies.

Cost-benefit analyses conducted by epidemiologists for the new rule emphasize the equally real live-saving impact of cutting the deadly soot pollution from the few dozen ancient coal plants that emit most of the nation's mercury pollution. By conceding that cutting the particulate matter would save thousands of lives, Whitfield was in effect admitting that current ambient air quality standards are not sufficient to protect American health either.

Economists are beginning to recognize that the costs of coal pollution outweigh the benefits of "cheap" coal electricity. Unless the coal industry cleans up its act, coal power is making the American economy sick.

MSNBC
Power plant rules unveiled: Higher bills, cleaner air
Coal-fired power plants across U.S. will have to reduce pollutants

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Wednesday unveiled rules for coal-fired power plants that mean costly investments passed on to consumers, but also health benefits.

Hundreds of older plants — which together make up the largest remaining source of unchecked toxic air pollution in the United States — will have to cut emissions or shut down.

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health," Lisa Jackson, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, said in a statement.

The American Lung Association added its support, calling it a "huge victory for public health" and echoing EPA estimates that the rules will prevent 130,000 child asthma attacks and 11,000 premature deaths each year.

Power plant operators who have trouble meeting a three-year deadline to reduce emissions of mercury and other toxics will be given some flexibility under a deal struck between the White House and the EPA, the Washington Post reported last Friday.

The EPA estimates the rules will cost utilities $9.6 billion by 2016 to install special equipment known as "scrubbers."

About 40 percent of the 1,400 coal-fired units nationwide still lack modern pollution controls, despite the EPA in 1990 getting the authority from Congress to control toxic air pollution from power plant smokestacks. A decade later, in 2000, the agency concluded it was necessary to clamp down on the emissions to protect public health.

The administration was under court order to issue a new rule, after a court threw out an attempt by the Bush administration to exempt power plants from toxic air pollution controls.

In a video released Wednesday afternoon, President Barack Obama said the decades of delays caused by special interest groups that resulted in standards never being put into place for power "was wrong."

"Today, my administration is saying, 'Enough'," he said.

When fully implemented in 2016, the standards will slash mercury pollution from burning coal by 90 percent, lung-damaging acid gases by 88 percent and soot-producing sulfur dioxide by 41 percent.

Companies that generate most of their power with "clean" fuel sources like nuclear, natural gas and renewables have supported the standards, while those that get most of their power from coal, including American Electric Power and Southern, have vigorously fought the rules.

Scott Segal, an energy industry lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani, said the rules will result in the loss of more than 1.4 million jobs by 2020 as utilities are forced to shutter old coal-fired plants. He estimated that for every temporary job created in technologies to clean up power plants four higher paying jobs, often union ones, will be lost.

"The bottom line: this rule is the most expensive air rule that EPA has ever proposed in terms of direct costs," he added. "It is certainly the most extensive intervention into the power market and job market that EPA has ever attempted to implement."

He also cited an industry-sponsored study that estimated areas with the most coal power plants could see electricity prices rise by 19 percent.

"Much is made of the current debate over extending the payroll tax holiday," he told msnbc.com. "The irony is that a middle class family may end up giving that entire tax benefit back in the form of higher utility bills."

EPA spokeswoman Enesta Jones countered that "EPA modeling indicates that these standards will result in relatively small changes in the average retail price of electricity (approximately 3 percent)."

Republicans had joined opponents, and in October the EPA delayed approval, saying it needed more time to review the 960,000 comments it received on a draft of the measure.

In response to concerns about the costs, the EPA has said the money saved in health care costs will be greater than the amount polluters will need to invest in retooling their plants to meet the new standards.

A group of 25 states has launched a court case over the rules, seeking a delay of at least a year for what they argue is an expensive measure that will shut down old coal-fired power plants.

Analysts have said American Electric Power and Duke Energy could see temporary shutdowns because of the rules.

To ease those concerns, the EPA will encourage states to make "broadly available" an additional fourth year to comply. Case-by-case extensions could also be granted to address local reliability issues.

The EPA, which had also been sued by environmental groups to finalize the rule, has maintained that the regulation is needed to prevent illnesses and deaths caused by air pollution.

Environmentalists were pleased with the final rules.

"After decades of industry-induced delay, the Environmental Protection Agency did exactly what it was designed to do: look out for our health and our environment," said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The EPA estimates the rules will save $37 billion to $90 billion in health care costs each year by 2016 as technology to cut mercury emissions also reduces emissions of fine particulates, which can damage hearts and lungs.