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EPA carbon standards push plants toward clean energy

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In a move to address the harmful effects of greenhouse gas emissions on public health and their threat to climate change, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed Tuesday carbon pollution standards for newly constructed power plants.

Fossil-fuel-fired power plants are the largest sources of carbon pollution and have long operated without emissions regulations.

"Right now there are no limits to the amount of carbon pollution that future power plants will be able to put into our skies ? and the health and economic threats of a changing climate continue to grow," said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson in a press release.

"We?re putting in place a standard that relies on the use of clean, American-made technology to tackle a challenge that we can?t leave to our kids and grandkids," she said.

The proposed standards, to be enforced through the Clean Air Act, would require plants to limit carbon pollution to 1,000 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt-hour.

The standard is based primarily on natural gas performance, the rule states, since it has become increasingly more available and at lower costs, leading to an industry trend toward new plants powered by natural gas, not coal.

On average, plants using natural gas produce 1,135 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt hour of power produced, whereas coal-powered plants exert 2,249 pounds.

"By setting the carbon dioxide performance standard for coal at the same emissions level as a natural gas plant, today?s rule levels the playing field between coal and gas," said Conrad Schneider, advocacy director for the Clean Air Task Force, in a statement. "With equivalent carbon emissions, the two fuels/technologies will now compete on price."

The carbon standards would only apply to new plants, and would exclude those currently in operation or the approximate 15 plants with permits for construction in the next 12 months. Also unaffected would be new power plants not burning fossil fuels.

Several Catholic groups have endorsed the proposed greenhouse gas rule. In a statement, Catholics United said it "welcomes this ruling," calling care for God?s creation a central component to Catholic social teaching, as evident in Pope Benedict XVI?s strong position on protecting the environment.

"Catholics United welcomes the EPA?s greenhouse gas rule," said James Salt, executive director of Catholics United, in a statement. "This White House has demonstrated the courage to address the great moral challenges of our day, even in an election year. Care for creation is a central moral concern for many people of faith."

?We can no longer delay bold action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,? said Sr. Karen Donahue, a justice coordinator for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas from Michigan.

Other reactions to the Obama administration?s proposal have been split among familiar lines, with environmental groups applauding and the coal industry criticizing. While the ruling would have little effect on new natural gas plants and existing plants, some see it as the beginning of the end for coal-generated electricity.

"These first-ever carbon pollution standards for new power plants mean that business as usual for the nation?s biggest sources of carbon pollution, dirty coal-burning utilities, is over," said Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club.

"These carbon pollution protections mark the end of an era for antiquated, dirty coal plants and continue the momentum behind clean energy to ensure healthier kids, families and workers, as well as much-needed job creation and a more secure climate future," he said.

A statement from Hal Quinn, the president and CEO of the National Mining Association, called the proposal "a poorly disguised cap-and-tax scheme that represents energy and economic policy at its worst."

"This proposal is the latest convoy in EPA?s regulatory train wreck that is rolling across America, crushing jobs and arresting our economic recovery at every stop. It is not an 'all of the above' energy strategy; it does not create jobs; and it does not make it easier for Americans to pay their mortgages," he said, adding the standards would deliberately push America to abandon coal as an energy source.

In 2011, the U.S. Energy Information Association reported coal-fired power plants generated 42 percent of all electricity in the U.S.; natural gas accounted for 25 percent. In January, the EIA estimated coal?s share of overall electricity generation will drop to 39 percent by 2035.

In its statement, the EPA said its proposal "reflects the ongoing trend in the power sector to build cleaner plants that take advantage of American-made technologies" and provides flexibility for new plants to incorporate new technologies to reduce carbon pollution.

EPA anticipates no additional compliance costs, as current projections for future plants ? most expected to use natural gas ? suggest they would meet the standard even without today?s proposed rule.

For potential coal plants incorporating carbon capture and storage to meet emissions standards, the EPA said they would have the option of using a 30-year average to demonstrate compliance, rather than adhering to an annual figure.

The agency cited the threats unchecked greenhouse gas emissions have on overall health and on climate in its rationale for the proposed ruling. Those included increases in smog, more prolonged and intense heat waves, fluctuations in precipitation and increased fires and insect outbreaks in U.S. forests.

There will be a 60-day comment period on the proposal, during which the EPA will hold public hearings for discussion.

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