

E.P.A. Announces Strict New Health Standards for Smog

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Hundreds of communities far from congested highways and belching smokestacks could soon join America's big cities and industrial corridors in violation of stricter limits on lung-damaging smog proposed Thursday by the Obama administration.

Costs of compliance could be in the tens of billions of dollars, but the government said the rules would save other billions -- as well as lives -- in the long run.

More than 300 counties -- mainly in southern California, the Northeast and Gulf Coast -- already violate the current, looser requirements adopted two years ago by the Bush administration and will find it even harder to reduce smog-forming pollution enough to comply with the law.

The new limits being considered by the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) could more than double the number of counties in violation and reach places like California's wine country in Napa Valley and rural Trego County, Kan., and its 3,000 residents.

For the first time, counties in Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, the Dakotas, Kansas, Minnesota and Iowa might be forced to find ways to clamp down on smog-forming emissions from industry and automobiles, or face government sanctions, most likely the loss of federal highway dollars.

The tighter standards, though costly to implement, will ultimately save billions in avoided emergency room visits, premature deaths, and missed work and school days, the EPA said.

"EPA is stepping up to protect Americans from one of the most persistent and widespread pollutants we face," said agency administrator [Lisa Jackson](#). "Using the best science to strengthen these standards is long overdue action that will help millions of Americans breathe easier and live healthier."

The proposal presents a range for the allowable concentration of ground-level ozone, the main ingredient in smog, from 60 parts per billion to 70 parts, as recommended by scientists during the Bush administration. That's equivalent to a single tennis ball in an Olympic-sized swimming pool full of tennis balls.

EPA plans to select a specific figure within that range by August. Counties and states will then have up to 20 years to meet the new limits, depending on how severely they are out of compliance. They will have to submit plans for meeting the new limits by end of 2013 or early 2014.

Former President [George W. Bush](#) personally intervened in the issue after hearing complaints from electric utilities and other affected industries. His EPA set a standard of 75 parts per billion, stricter than one adopted in 1997 but not as strict as what scientist said was needed to protect public health.

Some of those same industries reiterated their opposition Thursday to a stronger smog standard.

"We probably won't know for a couple of years just what utilities and other emissions sources will be required to do in response to a tighter ozone standard," said John Kinsman, a senior director at the Edison Electric Institute, an industry trade group. "Utilities already have made substantial reductions in ozone-related emissions."

Parts of the country that have already spent decades and millions of dollars fighting smog and are still struggling to meet existing thresholds questioned what more they could do. They've already cut

pollution from the easier sources, by increasing monitoring and enforcement and requiring car emissions tests.

"This EPA decision provides the illusion of greater protectiveness, but with no regard for cost, in terms of dollars or in terms of the freedoms that Americans are accustomed to," said Bryan W. Shaw, chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. Texas, with its heavy industry, is home to Houston, one of the smoggiest cities in the nation.

Environmentalists endorsed the new plan. "If EPA follows through, it will mean significantly cleaner air and better health protection," said Frank O'Donnell, president of the advocacy group Clean Air Watch.

EPA estimates meeting the new requirements will cost industry and motorists from \$19 billion to as much as \$90 billion a year by 2020. The Bush administration had put the cost of meeting its threshold at \$7.6 billion to \$8.5 billion a year.

The new regulations would mean more controls on large industrial facilities, plus regulating smaller facilities and sources. New federal regulations in the works to improve car and truck fuel economy and curb [global warming](#) pollution at large factories will also help communities meet any new standards, the EPA said.

Smog is a respiratory irritant that has been linked to asthma attacks and other illnesses. Global warming is expected to make it worse, since smog is created when emissions from cars, power and chemical plants, refineries and other factories mix in sunlight and heat.

But some parts of the country that could be found in violation of the proposed standards have very few cars and little industry. In places like these, smog-forming pollution is being blown in from hundreds of miles away.

Charlene Neish, director of Trego County Economic Development, moved to the rural county in western Kansas a decade ago from

Phoenix to escape big city problems like traffic and air pollution. Neish was shocked that her county, which has about nine people per square mile and virtually no industry, made the list.

"There is absolutely nothing in Trego County," Neish said. "We have wide open spaces and fresh air."

In Utah, six more counties would join the three in violation of the Bush standard.

Cheryl Heying, director of Utah's Division of Air Quality, said the change will not only require additional reductions in vehicle and industrial emissions, but a regional focus on other contributors such as wildfire smoke and offshore shipping.

"That doesn't mean we're just going to point our finger at everyone else, but if we don't cooperate, we're never going to get it done," Heying said.

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