



EPA cracks down on Wyoming power plants

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CASPER, Wyo. — The Environmental Protection Agency announced sweeping regulations Friday aimed at reducing pollution generated by Wyoming’s power plants. The move will reduce harmful nitrogen oxide emission by 65,000 tons annually, agency officials said, improving public health and limiting haze.

“EPA is taking final action on a regional haze plan that will improve visibility, and protect natural resources and recreation-based economies, in some of the nation’s most treasured national parks and wilderness areas,” EPA spokeswoman Lisa Vanderpool-McClain said in a statement.

The announcement ended a protracted battle over Wyoming’s air quality. The Cowboy State submitted a plan for limiting pollution at its power plants in 2011, four years after a federal deadline requiring states to outline a strategy on how to reduce haze. The EPA released its own proposal in 2012. It accepted large parts of the Wyoming plan, but also called on increased pollution controls for some plants.

The plan drew heavy criticism from Wyoming politicians and utilities, who argued the agency’s recommendations were too costly and would force plants to close.

Environmentalists too were unhappy. They said the EPA failed to meet federal deadlines for establishing a regional haze plan and last January sued the agency. A court decision required the EPA to issue a final ruling on the subject by Friday.

The immediate impact of the rule was unclear. The 714-page document was released Friday afternoon, and state officials, power company representatives and environmentalists were still sifting through its contents when contacted.

A spokesman for Gov. Matt Mead said EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy called to alert the governor a decision was coming, but that Mead is reviewing the document.

“Wyoming has a strong plan for meeting the goals laid out in the Regional Haze requirements of the Clean Air Act and the governor believes an EPA plan is unwarranted,” Mead spokesman Renny MacKay wrote in an email.

A spokesperson for Rocky Mountain Power, a PacifiCorp subsidiary, said the company needed more time to review the documents before commenting. In a June interview, a company spokesman told the Star-Tribune the company was opposed to EPA's initial proposal.

"Many of the company's coal-fueled generating plants in Wyoming may face early shutdown as a result of this rule," Dave Eskelsen said at the time. "EPA's proposal, if finalized, would require more extensive emission controls than the state of Wyoming proposed in its own regional haze State Implementation Plan. The state plan was workable, appropriate and one PacifiCorp supported."

Environmentalists' views were mostly mixed. The plan goes a long way toward addressing emissions at Wyoming's power plants, but the final draft did not go as far as the EPA's initial version to limit pollution, they said.

More stringent controls originally proposed for two units at the Naughton Plant in Kemmerer were removed from the final draft. Enhanced controls called for at a Dave Johnston Power Plant unit in Glenrock were also eliminated.

Overall, the EPA approved pollution controls recommended by Wyoming at 10 of its 15 power plant units. The agency said more stringent measures were needed at a Wyodack Power Plant unit near Gillette, a Dave Johnston unit and three units at the Laramie River Station near Wheatland.

"It's mixed-bag decision," said Shannon Anderson, an organizer at the Powder River Basin Resource Council, a Sheridan environmental group. "We're happy to see some stronger pollution control at Wyoming's coal plants and believe it's high time these older facilities come into the era of controlling air pollution."

Jeremy Nichols, director of the climate and energy program at WildEarth Guardians, an environmental group, had a similar view. He criticized the EPA's ruling that only two of the four units at the Jim Bridger Power Plant near Green River needed upgraded pollution controls. The agency wrote in its decision that requiring all four units to upgrade would be too costly.

But requiring upgrades for half the plant and letting the other half go makes a "mockery" of the Clean Air Act, he said. The overall plan nonetheless represents a "historic milestone" for Wyoming, he said, saying the state deserves credit for the rules it proposed.

"Obviously there are some disappointing shortcomings, but at the same time there are some positive actions that will lead to pollution cuts, and that is good for communities in Wyoming and beyond," Nichols said.