

Obama cancels smog regulation opposed by big business

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The Obama administration on Friday rejected a proposal from its own Environmental Protection Agency to tighten air standards for smog. The regulations, which scientists project would prevent thousands of premature deaths and health problems, were intensely opposed by energy corporations.

Obama's decision is part of a campaign by the administration to remove restraints on corporate profits, using the jobs crisis in the United States as a pretext.

The EPA regulations would have revised standards set by the Bush administration for ground-level ozone, or smog. The EPA proposal was in line with the unanimous opinion of its panel of scientific advisers and followed statements from Obama in 2010 indicating support for tightening the standards.

The proposal was itself very conservative, phasing in a reduction of ground-level ozone over a period of two decades. Areas with heavy smog levels would have even more time to comply.

In rejecting the standards, Obama made clear that his principal consideration was the profit interests of the energy corporations. "I have continued to underscore the importance of reducing regulatory burdens and regulatory uncertainty, particularly as our economy continues to recover," he said in a statement.

Cass Sunstein, Obama's administrator of regulatory affairs, explained in a letter to EPA head Lisa Jackson that the president was pursuing deregulation throughout the government in order "to minimize regulatory costs and burdens... The president has instructed me to give careful scrutiny to all regulations that impose significant costs on the private sector..."

The standards would have required factories and energy corporations to cut emissions of nitrogen oxides and other chemicals that contribute to the formation of smog. At the same time, the EPA has estimated that the new regulations would reduce health care costs by as much as \$100 billion.

According to the Clean Air Act, which covers the regulation of pollutants, the EPA is forbidden from considering costs as a factor in determining air quality standards. For this reason, the administration claimed that its decision to reject the new standards was based on the fact that there is ongoing scientific research, justifying a delay of new standards until 2013.

This is "a real dodge," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, in a phone interview. "Nobody, including the administration, is going to suggest that there is going to be new science tomorrow to say that these pollutants are not a danger to human health. It is a poor smokescreen for what is really going on. Obama is responding to industry pressure to the harm of the American public."

A statement released by the CBD noted, "The National Association of Clean Air Agencies says that EPA's own data shows that today's delay will result in more than 8,500 premature deaths, more than 45,000 cases of aggravated asthma, at least 1.5 million missed work or school days, and more than 5 million cases where citizens will need to restrict their activities."

The American Lung Association issued a statement Friday calling the decision "outrageous." Charles Connor, president of the association, commented, "For two years the administration dragged its feet in delaying its decision,

unnecessarily putting lives at risk. Its final decision not to enact a more protective health standard is jeopardizing the health of millions of Americans.”

The American Lung Association said it plans to revive legal action against the existing standards that it had suspended when Obama took office.

Obama announced at the beginning of the year a review of all existing regulations. Last month, the administration released a list of proposals that it said would save corporations \$10 billion over ten years. Business groups praised the move, but said it did not go far enough. The EPA proposal on ozone was cited as one measure that had to be scrapped.

Obama’s decision has broader significance for environmental regulations, particularly the Clean Air Act, long a target by energy corporations. Suckling noted that there has been a sharp increase in corporate litigation against the EPA over the regulation of greenhouse gasses, which cause climate change. “Obama is sending a message that the entire Clean Air Act is up for sale. Industry will be emboldened by this,” Suckling said.

Jack Gerard, president and CEO of the American Petroleum Institute, hailed Friday’s decision. “The president’s decision is good news for the economy and Americans looking for work. EPA’s proposal would have prevented the very job creation that President Obama has identified as his top priority,” he said.

The claim that scrapping the regulation has anything to do with jobs is a fraud. Corporate America is sitting on a record cash hoard, and corporate profits are back at pre-2008 levels. The administration has rejected any serious measures to address the jobs crisis, instead using it as an opportunity to intensify the attack on the working class.



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