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EPA carbon standards target new power plants

Brian Roewe | Sep. 20, 2013 Eco Catholic

A first move toward enacting President Barack Obama?s climate plan targets the single largest source of carbon pollution in the United States -- power plants.

The Environmental Protection Agency announced proposals [1] Friday to limit the amount of carbon dioxide emitted by new power plants into the atmosphere. If adopted, they would become the first national carbon regulations imposed on power plants.

As part of the Clean Air Act, the carbon standards would provide limits for both new coal- and natural gas-fired plants:

- Coal plants could not exceed 1,100 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt-hour
- Large natural gas plants could not exceed 1,000 pounds CO2 per megawatt-hour
- Small natural gas plants could not exceed 1,100 pounds CO2 per megawatt-hour

The separate standards for natural gas and coal plants represent a change from proposals announced in March 2012 [2], which would have held all new plants to 1,000 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt-hour. The regulations do not extend to current power plants, but proposals for those could come by June 2014.

Introducing the standards at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., recently appointed EPA administrator Gina McCarthy said the carbon limits would protect public health and the environment [3] while encouraging new technologies and without hindering the economy.

?Make no mistake about it, EPA?s action today to address carbon pollution from new power plants is an important step forward in our clean energy journey. It?s a necessary step to address a public health challenge that we cannot afford to avoid any longer,? she said.

?We have proven time after time that setting fair Clean Air Act standards to protect public health does not cause the sky to fall. The economy does not crumble,? she said.

McCarthy stressed that the climate change issue is not just about melting glaciers, but rather an issue that exacerbates extreme weather and endangers water supplies, public health, property and the economy.

?We must meet our moral obligation to the next generation ? to be good stewards of our natural resources. It?s those resources that provide the foundation for our health, our well-being, and our economy,? she said.

In June, Obama announced his three-part plan [4] for addressing climate, singling out a reduction in carbon pollution as a primary focus. The 2013 National Climate Assessment Report draft estimated carbon dioxide represented 80 percent of all U.S. emissions.

The EPA carbon standards are ?a necessary step in the direction of reducing the even more harmful prospect of a planet in turmoil because of climate change,? Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Coalition on

Climate Change, told *NCR* in an email.

Still, he urged Catholics to concern themselves with both the positive and negative impacts the regulations could have. In the short term, Misleh predicted utility companies would pass the costs of meeting the limits on to consumers, a consequence that could leave low-income families choosing between heat or food.

?There must be some mechanism within the rule to hold harmless those who will face additional financial burdens because of the rule,? he said.

Other short-term effects could extend to workers in the fossil fuel industry, who could experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. In the long run, though, Misleh saw the carbon rules leading to innovative sustainable energy solutions and, ultimately, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from the electricity sector, ?critical if we are to save future generations and stabilize the ecosystems upon which all life, including human life, depends.?

While the carbon limits and the rest of Obama?s climate plan are strictly executive actions, Misleh urged Catholics to urge their congressional representatives to take climate change seriously. He endorsed legislation that adopted carbon-reducing mechanisms, like cap-and-trade, but at the same time assisted those impacted by the programs (the poor, miners, etc.) as well as people in developing countries.

The EPA proposals come a day before climate-conscious groups across the country plan to mobilize in the latest effort against another proposal: the Keystone XL transnational pipeline.

Organized by the climate activist group 350.org, the day has been billed as one of action to ?draw the line? to stop the pipeline?s construction. Organizing materials provided by 350.org suggest a variety of ways groups can ?draw the line,? from small-scale chalk, hazard tape or ribbon lines, to larger-scale human chains at landmarks, figurative and literal pipelines, and retracing the path of a dried river bed.

Since Obama?s second inaugural address, environmental and climate organizations have staked out the pipeline as the first test [5] of the president?s commitment to address climate change in his second term. In February, 350.org and other organizations hosted in Washington the largest climate rally in U.S. history [6], bringing more than 35,000 people to the nation's capital to call for climate change but also a rejection of the Keystone pipeline.

The Obama administration has yet to make a final decision on the pipeline?s future. Legislation introduced this week from House Republicans sought to attach Keystone?s approval [7] to increasing the debt ceiling.

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