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Editor's Note: Updated 10 a.m. Central time March 26 with testimony from Catholic Climate Covenant on the proposed EPA rule.

Unborn children would face greater health risks if the Environmental Protection Agency moves to rescind a rule regulating hazardous air pollutants emitted by power plants, said the chairmen of two U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' committees.

The bishops argued in a March 22 statement that the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, or MATS, are needed to protect pregnant women as well.

"The proposed change to the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards rule is troubling since it is well-documented that pregnant mothers and their unborn children are the

most sensitive to mercury pollution and its adverse health effects," said Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

Added Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, "The MATS rule reflects a proper respect for life of the human person and of God's creation — a great example of integral ecology called for in 'Laudato Si',' " Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment.

The bishops' comments coincided with a March 18 letter sent by a bishops' conference official in response to the publication of the revised Environmental Protection Agency rule in the Federal Register Feb. 7.

The agency said it had concluded that it is not "appropriate and necessary" to regulate hazardous air pollutants from power plans because the cost of doing so "grossly outweighs" the benefits gained by doing so.

Anthony Picarello Jr., bishops' conference associate general secretary and general counsel, opposed the change in a detailed six-page letter, writing that the current standards "align strongly with key principles of Catholic social teaching."

He expressed concern that although the proposed rule change does not remove power plants from the list of regulated pollution sources under the Clean Air Act, it "greatly weakens legal justification for the rule and could ultimately cause great harm to human health and the environment."

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Picarello said that church teaching "calls us to care of God's creation and protect the common good and the life and dignity of human persons, especially the poor and vulnerable, from conception until natural death."

"In short, by failing to take into account the full range of costs, especially those imposed on the most vulnerable, the proposed rule fails to respect the life and dignity of the human person," Picarello's letter said as it outlined a series of technical findings on the danger to health posed by mercury and other hazardous air pollutants.

The bishops' conference supported the standards when they were proposed by President Barack Obama's administration in 2011 because "even small amounts of these harmful pollutants in the environment are linked to health problems, particularly in children before and after birth, the poor and the elderly," Picarello's letter said, quoting from the bishop's original comment on MATS.

The 180-degree turn by the Environmental Protection Agency came in response to a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision that found the federal agency erred by not considering cost in determining that broader regulation of power plant air pollutants was necessary.

Writing for the 5-4 majority in the case, then-Associate Justice Antonin Scalia wrote that the Environmental Protection Agency must consider costs and that agency officials misinterpreted the Clean Air Act in determining costs were not part of the equation when introducing MATS.

In separate testimony, the Catholic Climate Covenant echoed the U.S. bishops' conference —among the group's 18 national partner organizations — saying that Catholic social teaching measures every institution by "whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person."

"In this spirit, Catholic Climate Covenant believes the proposed rule threatens, rather than enhances the life and dignity of the human person and is a renunciation of the Environmental Protection Agency's mission to 'protect human health and the environment,'" said Jose Aguto, Covenant associate director, in testimony delivered March 18 at a public hearing on the proposed revision in Washington.

The Covenant asked EPA to give "due consideration" to the co-benefits of regulating mercury pollutants, especially from power plants run on fossil fuels. Among those benefits, it said, is technology used to prevent mercury from entering the air also reduces exposure to other hazardous air pollutants, such as carcinogens like arsenic, cadmium and chromium, as well as lead, hydrogen chloride and sulfur dioxide, "which can cause chronic and acute health disorders to the human body."

Catholic Climate Covenant also cited a 2016 EPA report that estimated more than 240,000 children had been exposed prenatally to mercury contamination. It said the proposed rollback failed to respect the life and dignity of the human person at all stages of development.

"We urge that the Agency find that regulation of these emissions from coal- and oil-fired power plants to be appropriate and necessary. We ask that EPA uphold the existing Mercury and Air Toxics Standards. By doing so, human life and the environment is valued justly, and EPA's mission is honored," Aguto said.

[Information on Catholic Climate Covenant's testimony contributed by NCR staff writer Brian Roewe.]