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EarthBeat



A coal-fired power plant is seen in this illustration photo. (CNS/Reuters/Kacper Pempel)



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Hundreds of faith leaders have called on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to implement the strongest possible standards to cut greenhouse gas emissions from the nation's fossil fuel-fired power plants, saying it is a critical step to curtail climate change and protect communities from harmful pollution.

"For more than a decade, people of faith and conscience have advocated for strong safeguards on climate pollution from power plants. Since then, the climate crisis has only accelerated, taking an enormous toll on human life, our communities, and our world," more than 600 priests, pastors, rabbis and religious from 44 states and Puerto Rico wrote in a letter delivered Aug. 8 to EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"We have a moral obligation to protect our climate," they said, with 200-plus Catholic women religious among the signatories.

In May, EPA proposed standards for carbon pollution under the Clean Air Act for new and existing power plants that operate on coal and gas. Once finalized, it would be the first ever rule to reduce carbon emissions from fossil fuel-fired power plants. The proposed regulations set pollution rate caps on plants, which vary for new and existing plants and whether they run on coal or gas, and become increasingly stringent over time.

The power sector trails only transportation among the nation's largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions, and is the largest stationary source, producing 25% of overall emissions primarily from the combustion of fossil fuels. The proposed standards seek to curb that output, with the EPA estimating through 2042 they will cumulatively slash up to 617 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions from coal and new gas power plants, and up to 407 million metric tons of CO2 emissions from existing gas plants.

The rules are one of numerous measures the Biden administration has put forward to achieve the U.S. commitment under the Paris Agreement to reduce national emissions by half from 2005 levels by 2030, and reach net-zero emissions in electricity by 2035.

Aug. 8 was the deadline for the 60-day commenting period on the proposed standards. That day, members of Interfaith Power & Light joined other climate and environmental organizations outside EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C., to highlight more than 1 million comments in support of the power plant regulations.

"Across America, people of faith are uniting in a powerful call to action, coming together to demand that we care for creation by implementing more comprehensive standards to cut power plant pollution," said the Rev. Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power & Light, at the event.

Marianne Comfort, justice coordinator for Earth, anti-racism and women for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, told EarthBeat the regulations are important "because they really get at the crux of the matter of really reducing actual emissions."

The faith letter, addressed to EPA Administrator Michael Regan and organized and circulated by Interfaith Power & Light and the Sisters of Mercy, urged Regan to act quickly in setting "the strongest possible limits on carbon pollution from fossil fuel-fired power plants to protect our communities."

The faith leaders noted "the climate crisis is already upon us," pointing to impacts present across the country of a rapidly heating world: dangerous wildfires, extreme heat, prolonged droughts, severe flooding and more powerful storms and hurricanes. "We are running out of time to avoid even more serious consequences," they said.

In addition to making inroads on the U.S. climate target, the EPA estimates the proposed rules will result in $85 billion in climate and public health benefits in the next two decades, including eliminating tens of thousands of tons of PM 2.5, or soot, and other harmful pollutants from the air. By 2030, the agency projects the standards will prevent 1,300 premature deaths, 300,000 asthma attacks and more than 800 hospital and emergency room visits annually.

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The faith leaders said that the EPA and the Biden administration "must follow through on critical protections" for people who historically have suffered the greatest from pollution from power plants and live closest to them, particularly Black, Indigenous, elderly and disabled communities. They stressed that the White House must conduct meaningful and sustained consultation with environmental justice and community-based organizations in the adoption and implementation of the rules.

"We speak with one voice on behalf of our neighbors, our communities, and our collective future," the religious leaders stated in the letter. "It is the moral responsibility of our nation, and our sacred task as people of faith, to protect our ecosystems, advance environmental justice and public health, and address the climate crisis."

In a virtual press call Aug. 8, environmental justice advocates raised numerous problems they see in the current edition of the proposed standards. They criticized the allowance of green hydrogen and carbon capture and sequestration technologies, which speakers said will permit power plants to continue to emit and even increase pollutants beyond greenhouse gases. They also argued the current rule is not bold enough and will perpetuate the use of fossil fuel-fired power plants that pollute communities and occupy huge tracts of land.

"We think these rules are a distraction from the more urgent need to quickly transition off fossil fuels that disproportionately harm EJ [environmental justice] communities. Instead, we should rapidly shift toward 100% renewable energy with proven technologies, such as solar and wind, that create good green jobs for our communities," said Peggy Shepard, executive director of WE ACT For Environmental Justice.

Comfort told EarthBeat the Sisters of Mercy were also concerned about the carbon capture being put forward by the regulation as an option to reduce emissions. "If we capture the CO2, that doesn't necessarily mean that you don't have all these other pollutants going into the air and causing great harm to the communities that live there."

The effort by the EPA to address pollution from power plants dates back three presidencies. In 2015, former President Barack Obama attempted to set standards through the Clean Power Plan, but the U.S. Supreme Court paused it before it was

ever enacted. The plan languished in the courts while former President Donald Trump rescinded and replaced it with a weaker version, which also was never enacted. In June 2022, the high court ruled that the EPA had issued the Clean Power Plan without explicit authority from Congress. The Biden administration had waited until that ruling before proposing its own standards.

Throughout the commenting period, faith leaders and religious communities have weighed in.

In late July, Catholic religious in Monroe, Michigan, held an event titled "We Can't Breathe" to mobilize support for more stringent emissions standards, including on the nearby DTE Monroe Power Plant, a coal-fired plant that is among the top emitters in the country.

"We have seen the EPA shrink back on other air pollution matters. We're urging them to stay strong in the face of the pressure campaign from the fossil fuel industry," Adrian Dominican Sr. Virginia (Ginny) King said during the event at the motherhouse of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

It is unclear when EPA will issue a final rule on emissions from power plants. The carbon pollution standard for power plants is among a slew of rules EPA has proposed in the past year. Others have looked to address soot pollution, forever chemicals, toxic pollution from chemical plants, methane emissions and new emissions standards for passenger and heavy-duty vehicles.

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