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Proposed federal pollution regulations could help Adirondack lakes

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is championing a revised set of regulations aimed at reducing the amount of pollutants discharged into the atmosphere by coal-powered plants.

Lawmakers and activists have spent years trying to control the pollutants, which experts say end up in Adirondack lakes in the form of acid rain.

John Sheehan is spokesman for the Adirondack Council. He told WNBZ Wednesday the proposed revisions to the Clean Air Interstate Rule – which would cap the amount of Nitrogen oxide and Sulfur dioxide a plant could emit in a given year – would be a significant step in alleviating the environmental strain on the region's water bodies due to acidification.

“The park needs to see a deeper reduction in pollution before the damage here will stop,” Sheehan said. “Our soils are thinner and some of our soils here have already been saturated by Nitrogen.”

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has warned about the dangers of Nitrogen oxide and Sulfur dioxide – also known as Nox and Sox – for years. The state estimates some 700 Adirondack lakes and ponds have been seriously damaged by the constant onslaught of the byproducts of coal firing.

The state blames about three dozen coal-fired power plants in the Ohio River Valley for the vast majority of Adirondack acidification.

The EPA estimates the revised rule could also greatly reduce infant mortality in the nation's eastern half.

The regulation would affect the 31 eastern-most states and has drawn criticism from the coal industry and business advocates alike. By 2015, it would reduce Nox emissions by 52 percent and Sox emissions by 71 percent relative to 2005 levels.

Sheehan notes that the Adirondacks are especially vulnerable to some particulate pollutants.

“The addition of any more Nitrogen beyond what the soil can accept turns into Nitric acid and ends up as water pollution,” he said.

The council – like most environmental groups – would prefer the issue of pollution be dealt with through an act of Congress instead of agency regulation. Laws are typically harder to overturn than agency-imposed regulations.

In 2008, a federal court temporarily halted the enforcement of the interstate rule until the EPA could find a better way of allocating pollution allowances to individual businesses.

The Obama administration rolled out the current proposal Tuesday as a response to the court's injunction.

Green groups hope the rule will serve as a catalyst for legislation that addresses the national coal issue.

A bill authored by Delaware Democratic Senator Tom Carper would codify limits on Nox, Sox and Mercury emissions on all industry.

But Sheehan said federal lawmakers may be more willing to accept something more specific to the issue.

“There are a couple of different approaches by the Obama administration. One would be a stand alone bill for power plants that would require cuts in Carbon as well as Sulfur, Nitrogen and Mercury. The other would require cuts to all industry,” he said. “At the moment, we think the folks in Washington seem to be leaning towards the first solution.”

After being emitted, Nox, Sox and Mercury can travel for hundreds of miles in the jet stream before falling on neighboring states.

The regulations and proposed legislation are being opposed by the coal industry, which points to the high expense associated with emissions scrubbing technology.

-Jon Alexander, 7-8-10