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BLOG ENTRY

The EPA clears the air

July 8, 2010 at 6:00 am by Jim McGrath

From today's editorials: New federal rules are issued to cut down on pollution from power plants. The result will be less smog and soot in the mountains and cities alike.

Environmental activists haven't had nearly as much to cheer about as they might have expected during the Obama administration. Nor have the less politically inclined people who benefit from such activism and environmental regulation.

The President has had only limited success in winning over Congress on legislation to control greenhouse gas emissions. The Gulf oil spill has been as much, if not more, of a disaster for this administration as it would have been for any other.

With that in mind, it's well worth embracing the new restrictions on pollution from power plants that the Environmental Protection Agency announced on Tuesday. The rules would replace a similar 2005 order that was overturned in court, largely on a technicality, in 2008.

"The EPA proposal is a big step in the right direction," says Frank O'Donnell of Clean Air Watch, an advocacy group, in a statement that's roughly equal parts congratulations, context and caution. "It's a step toward taming the environmental beast known as the coal-fired power plant. But it is only a first step. EPA still needs to move ahead with plans next year to limit power plant emissions of toxic mercury and other hazardous air pollutants."

The key effect of the new rules when they take effect next year will be to substantially reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. Among the regions that will particularly benefit is the Northeast.

That, of course, prominently includes the Adirondacks, where a recovery from acid rain and other industrial pollution will be able to continue. The acidity found in both seasonal snowfall and permanent waterways will be further reduced, says John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council, to the point where toxic metals contamination would be episodic rather than chronic. Fish and aquatic insects could soon return to ponds and lakes that have become sterile. Aquatic life is already returning to some waters because of pollution reductions required by laws that preceded the new EPA rules.

More populated areas of the affected regions would see improved human health. Reducing the smog and soot from coal-burning power plants means fewer incidences of asthma and acute bronchitis, which in turn are linked to heart attacks. The EPA predicts that between 14,000 and 36,000 premature deaths will be prevented each year.

All this comes at an inevitable, yet not unreasonable price. Compliance with the new rules, the EPA says, would cost about \$2.8 billion a year. Improvements to public health, meantime, would be worth between \$120 billion and \$290 billion.

Even the reaction from the power companies' lobby reaction was restrained. The industry is glad that companies still will be able to trade emission permits. It's the anticipated further changes in ozone protection levels that concern them more.

In the stifling smog of a summer heat wave, there's suddenly good reason to look forward to cleaner air.