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EPA to propose tighter smog standards
By Jeff Nesmith

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday will propose reducing the allowable concentration of ozone in the air by up to 12 percent, industry representatives and state pollution officials said Wednesday.

Existing limits fail to adequately protect the public health, EPA reportedly will say in a court-ordered regulatory action.

However, in addition to proposing the reduction, the agency will seek public comment on keeping allowable limits at the present level.

EPA was under a court order to propose new ozone standards no later than Wednesday.

Ozone, popularly known as "smog," appears in the air when two classes of pollutants, volatile organic compounds and oxides of nitrogen, combine. The pollutants come primarily from automobiles and industrial sources, especially electric power plants. They are associated with increased mortality from heart and respiratory disease.

An agency spokesman said the new proposal was to be signed Wednesday but would not be made public until Thursday. The agency called a press conference for 9 a.m. in Washington.

However, the National Association of Manufacturers and the Association of Clean Air Agencies said separately the agency will propose reductions.

"I find it very troubling that EPA is going to state in their proposal that existing ozone standards are unhealthful and yet solicit public comment on not changing the standards," said Bill Becker, executive director for the clean air agency group, which represents state and local pollution control officials.

"We are pleased that the agency is proposing to tighten the existing standards," he added.

The manufacturers' group said meeting the reductions could cost up to \$100 billion.

"Does increasing the cost of home heating, or driving, or manufacturing of pharmaceuticals, whatever, have a negative impact on people's health?" the group asked in a statement posted on its Web site.

"Does that impact outweigh the theoretical benefits of reduced smog? Does \$100 billion in increased manufacturing costs divert resources from more beneficial uses?"

EPA staff scientists have recommended that the limits be reduced significantly.

A panel of outside advisers endorsed the recommendation, noting in a letter to EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson that "overwhelming scientific evidence" supports the opinion of EPA scientists that the current limits should be lowered because of damage ozone does to hearts and lungs.

Many counties in the United States fail to comply with the proposed new levels.

They include counties in the Atlanta area, Austin and Longview areas in Texas and four Dayton-area counties that recently were found to comply with the existing standard.

If the proposed new standards are adopted, states would have six years to develop plans to reduce ozone levels. The new plans would not have to go into effect for some areas until 2030.

When counties fail to attain EPA's ozone standard, states are required to institute measures to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds.

The current standard is 0.08 parts per million, meaning that the average of the fourth-highest ozone levels in each of three years must not exceed that concentration.

In the new proposal, EPA would reduce the allowable standard to either .07 or .075 parts per million, the manufacturers' group said in its web site posting.

Becker said he had confirmed the figures with his own "administration sources."

The EPA staff had recommended that Johnson consider reducing the allowable concentrations to .06 parts per million.

"EPA is sending a mixed message," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, an advocacy group. "The good news is they appear to agree that the current smog standards are too weak. On the other hand, it's really disturbing that EPA is going to solicit comments on keeping the existing standards."

In addition to industry groups, Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue recently joined governors of several other states and the chair of the Texas Environmental Quality Commission in appealing to the Bush administration to leave the allowable levels where they are.

Coincidentally, EPA published an announcement in the Federal Register Wednesday declaring that four Dayton-Springfield counties in Ohio – Clark, Greene, Miami and Montgomery – were in compliance with the existing ozone standards, based on readings taken in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

However, of the four counties, only Montgomery had a three-year average below .075

parts per million.

The average for Montgomery County was .073 parts per million, EPA said.

Averages for the other counties were: Clark, .08 parts per million at one monitoring station and .076 at another; Greene, .079 parts per million, and Miami, .078 parts per million, EPA said.