EPA targets Obama-era crackdown on mercury from coal-fired plants

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WASHINGTON
The Trump administration on Friday targeted an Obama-era regulation credited with helping dramatically reduce toxic mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants, saying the benefits to human health and the environment may not be worth the cost of the regulation.

The 2011 Obama administration rule, called the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, led to what electric utilities say was an $18 billion clean-up of mercury and other toxins from the smokestacks of coal-fired power plants.

Overall, environmental groups say, federal and state efforts have cut mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants by 85 percent in roughly the last decade.
Mercury causes brain damage, learning disabilities and other birth defects in children, among other harm. Coal power plants in this country are the largest single man-made source of mercury pollutants, which enters the food chain through fish and other items that people consume.

A proposal Friday from the Environmental Protection Agency would leave current emissions standards in place. However, it challenges the basis for the Obama regulation, calculating that the crackdown on mercury and other toxins from coal plants produced only a few million dollars a year in measurable health benefits and was not “appropriate and necessary” – a legal benchmark under the country’s landmark Clean Air Act.

The proposal, which now goes up for public comment, is the latest Trump administration move that changes estimates of the costs and payoffs of regulations in arguing for relaxing Obama-era protections.

It’s also the administration’s latest proposed move on behalf of the U.S. coal industry, which has been struggling in the face of competition from natural gas and other cheaper, cleaner forms of energy. The Trump administration in August proposed an overhaul for another Obama-era regulation that would have prodded electricity providers to get less of their energy from dirtier-burning coal plants.

In a statement, the EPA said Friday the administration was “providing regulatory certainty” by more accurately estimating the costs and benefits of the Obama administration crackdown on mercury and other toxic emissions from smokestacks.

Hal Quinn, head of the National Mining Association, charged in a statement Friday that the Obama administration had carried out “perhaps the largest regulatory accounting fraud perpetrated on American consumers” when it calculated that the broad health benefits to Americans would outweigh the cost of equipment upgrades by power providers.

Sen. Tom Carper of Delaware, the top Democrat on the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee, condemned the Trump administration’s move.

The EPA has “decided to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory” after the successful clean-up of toxins from the country’s coal-plant smokestacks, Carper said.

He and other opponents said the Trump administration was playing with numbers, ignoring clear health, environmental and economic benefits.
CaliforniaGeo Responds—

It seems like the business of government has become service to business and not representation of citizens’ needs. Outdated energy business models are on governmental life support by de-regulation (such as that above) and by direct financial subsidy (as is the case for both coal and nuclear generating plants in Illinois and the southeastern U.S.). They both already receive decades-long tax subsidies.

Government “help” might be seen as a last resort because major financial institutions are not lining up as briskly as before to finance new coal or nuclear facilities. And this change has less to do with ideology or public relations. Rather it is more about real business metrics central to the investment decision. What is the 20-year levelized cost (LCOE) of nuclear or coal-fired generation of electricity in $/Kwh?

When the fuel is free (by renewables) and the facility is at scale, the LCOEs are swinging to wind and solar for power generation. These facilities also take far less time for permitting and construction. If there was a nationwide cost assessed to carbon combustion and wastes or a risk premium attached to nuclear, we’d have a truer LCOE picture, and increased certainty for energy investors. This would enhance the renewable generation option.

Buggy whip manufacturers probably detested the coming of “horseless carriages.” If they could have had a friendlier government, all cars would have been forced to carry buggy whips to ward off remaining horses from the streets. That’s regulatory protection that subverts the development of a free market.

Why does a geothermal heat pump organization care about converting to renewable electricity provision? Because our equipment runs on electricity to move thermal energy (renewably) from the earth and back into it. When we do it with greener electrons—heating, cooling, and hot water via our equipment becomes a totally renewable (and carbonless) enterprise. This is a potent weapon against climate change that is already costing us billions in the U.S. from drought, superstorms, floods, wildfires, air pollution, and mounting respiratory health costs.