

**Democrats, Environmentalists
Rip Bush's Clean-Air Proposal**

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During his State of the Union address in January, President Bush touted his "Clear Skies" proposal. Bush said it was part of his plan "to promote energy independence for our country, while dramatically improving the environment."

"I have sent to you Clear Skies legislation that mandates a 70-percent cut in air pollution from power plants over the next 15 years," the president told a joint session of Congress.

The president urged lawmakers to approve Clear Skies "for the good of both our country and our economy." Now, Democratic lawmakers and environmentalists are saying that Bush misled the country. In a letter last week, four Democratic House members alleged that the president's estimate of Clear Skies' benefits was "simply not true." Even worse, the Democrats say, the administration knew it wasn't true.

"If we are to have a fair and honest debate, we must begin with accurate and complete information," the Democrats said.

The Clean Air Trust, an environmental group, distributed copies of the letter and called Bush's statement "a pretty significant fib."

The letter -- signed by Reps. Tom Allen of Maine, Ed Markey of Massachusetts, Frank Pallone of New Jersey and Lois Capps of California -- notes that a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency analysis released in September 2002 showed emission reductions of only 65 percent by 2020.

A later EPA study, released this April, showed even smaller reductions from Clear Skies. In that report, the EPA estimated 2020 emissions of the three pollutants targeted by Clear Skies at 5.9 million tons. That's 63.5 percent lower than 2000 figures, the report showed.

The differences are significant. Compared to Bush's stated 70-percent reduction, a 63.5 percent cut would mean an additional one million tons of sulfur-dioxide pollution a year. That's about 10 times the sulfur dioxide emitted each year by American Electric Power's huge John Amos Power Plant near Nitro.

In 2002 and again this year, the Bush administration introduced Clear Skies. The proposal is Bush's central air-pollution initiative, aimed at massive cuts in emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and mercury from coal-fired and other power plants.

Exposure to these pollutants at current levels has been linked to serious respiratory illnesses and premature deaths. In West Virginia, coal-fired power plants are the largest industrial sources of air pollution.

EPA spokeswoman Lisa Harrison said there is no discrepancy between Bush's speech and agency estimates. She dismissed the Democrats' letter as "election-year games."

"The president's statement during the State of the Union is absolutely true, and EPA continues to use that same statement," Harrison said.

The EPA says that Clear Skies, if approved by Congress, would enact a sulfur-dioxide emission cap of 3 million tons in 2018. If attained, this cap amounts to a 71 percent reduction over 2000 emissions.

However, the EPA's own reports show that cap would not actually be met by 2018, or by 2020. Instead, the EPA projects emissions of 4.2 million tons in 2020.

In its latest report on Clear Skies, the EPA blamed the excess emissions in 2020 on its emissions "banking" program. Under this program, companies can reduce emissions by larger amounts than required in the early years of Clear Skies. They can "bank" those reductions, and use them to offset lesser reductions in the later years of the program.

The EPA said this leads to emissions above the 2018-cap "gradually declining to the cap level." The report did not specify when the cap would be met.

In their letter to Bush, the Democratic lawmakers noted that EPA staff said during a congressional hearing that the 2018 cap might be reached in 2025.

"This is startlingly different than your assurance that a 70 percent reduction would be mandated over the next 15 years, or by 2018," the lawmakers said.