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## Bush Denied Stricter Option to Clear Skies Plan

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

**W**ASHINGTON, April 25 — In developing President Bush's Clear Skies proposal to reduce air pollution, the White House rejected a more stringent alternative drawn up by his own Environmental Protection Agency.

Bush administration documents show that the agency's alternative proposal would have reduced air pollution further and faster than the proposal Mr. Bush eventually chose.

For example, the environmental agency argued that the amount of sulfur dioxide emitted nationally should be limited to two million tons per year by 2010. But the White House rejected that proposal, and when Mr. Bush announced his plan in February, he set a level of three million tons to be achieved by 2018. Sulfur dioxide causes acid rain and other environmental problems.

Administration officials say they rejected the agency's proposal as unfeasible, and E.P.A. officials are now promoting the White House policy. The Clear Skies proposal, the administration says, will reduce pollution more than if the Clean Air Act were left in place, although the administration has not released data to support that contention.

Critics say the administration scrapped the agency proposal because it wanted to spare the utility industry the costs and burdens of more controls. Many older power plants would not be required to install the latest pollution controls under the administration's plan.

Critics also say that the Environmental Protection Agency lost out again in a struggle with the Department of Energy, which shares the White House goal of easing regulations on the energy industry.

The environmental agency's proposal would have allowed the 1970 Clean Air Act and the 1990 amendments signed into law by President George Bush to take full effect, with other antipollution measures.

But the industry and the current Bush administration perceived that approach as duplicative, inefficient, expensive and overly regulatory. Instead, the Bush plan would set national limits for mercury, nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide. Plants with high levels of emissions could either reduce their emissions with controls or buy credits from plants with lower emissions, an option that environmentalists say would allow dirty plants to remain dirty.

Jeffrey R. Holmstead, the Environmental Protection Agency's assistant administrator for the office of air and radiation, said that the agency's proposal would have been unworkable.

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"It is true that one of the options that E.P.A. put on the table was more stringent," Mr. Holmstead said. "But we talked with people in the power sector and union folks, and we were convinced it was not feasible — there was not enough manpower to put on the types of controls that our models suggested would be necessary."

As the agency's proposal worked its way through the administration last fall and winter, the Department of Energy and the utility industry strongly opposed it. A critique from the Edison Electric Institute, which represents the utilities, called it draconian and said its assumptions rested on thin ice. The institute gave more credence to what it called the Energy Department's "very insightful concerns."

Environmentalists said that industry complaints met sympathetic ears in the White House.

"E.P.A. was fighting to maintain the deep reductions in power plant emissions signed into law by the first President Bush in 1990," said Phil Clapp, president of the National Environmental Trust. "But the current president decided to undo his father's biggest environmental accomplishment and let the utilities off the hook."

Environmentalists dispute the administration's contention that Mr. Bush's proposal would reduce emissions more than if the Clean Air Act were left in place.

Internal documents made available to The New York Times show that the Environmental Protection Agency analyzed the benefits of its proposal. The documents say that the agency's proposal would prevent at least 19,000 premature deaths, 12,000 new cases of chronic bronchitis and 17,000 hospitalizations and would save about \$154 billion in annual health care costs by 2020.

No comparable analysis exists of deaths or disease averted under the Bush proposal — in part, administration officials said, because it is a legislative proposal, not a regulatory one, and the legislative language is still being written.

Senator James M. Jeffords, the Vermont independent and chairman of the environment and public works committee, said it was "amazing" that the administration had not produced a detailed analysis of the plan's affect on air quality.

"That begs the question why they would put out such a major proposal without knowing what its impact on public health would be," Mr. Jeffords said.

In efforts to sell its plan nationwide, the administration has put forth some details.

At a meeting this week in Wisconsin with state environmental officials, Mr. Holmstead released several maps showing that the Bush proposal would reduce pollution in counties across the country.

The maps indicate, for example, that today, 407 counties, most in the eastern third of the country and in California, do not meet the current ozone standards, which were written in the Clinton administration and upheld by the Supreme Court after an industry challenge. But the maps show that under the Clear Skies restrictions on emissions, only 112 counties would be out of compliance by 2010, and 62 would be out of compliance by 2020.

"This is not all due to Clear Skies," Mr. Holmstead said. "Some of it is due to improvements in vehicle emissions. But in terms of improving air quality, it's dramatic."

The maps carried disclaimers that said they were based on preliminary analyses and could change once the data was refined. Some state officials at the meeting, particularly those from the Northeast, which bears the brunt of wind-borne pollution, were skeptical of Mr. Holmstead's assertions without seeing a full analysis.

"Clearly, the maps are dramatic," said Nicholas DiPasquale, secretary of Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. "It's a picture all of us want to see happen. But the question is, will Clear Skies get us there or are we better off with existing laws? We won't know until we see the analysis. We asked for it, and it wasn't provided. And it's safe to assume that the states aren't going to buy into Clear Skies until we see that kind of analysis."

The views of these state officials are important to the administration because they can influence whether their Congressional delegations vote for the president's plan when it reaches Capitol Hill.

Skepticism of the Bush plan is particularly deep in the Northeast, where officials are pressing the administration not to abandon elements of the Clean Air Act that they say will continue to purify the air as it has for the last 30 years.

Bradley M. Campbell, commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, said the administration was "overstating the speed and extent of the reductions largely by assuming a baseline that doesn't include the benefits of the current program, if it were enforced."

Mr. Campbell added, "Whether it's a matter of intention or effect, this is a huge gift to the electric generating industry."