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Mainers irate at clean air proposal

Bush would relax anti-pollution law

By Susan Young
Of the NEWS Staff

If the Bush administration goes ahead this week with plans to weaken the federal Clean Air Act, Maine citizens can expect increased ill health effects and obscured vistas from polluted air blown in from other states, according to government officials and environmental groups.

The expected changes would broaden loopholes allowing old, coal-fired power plants to keep operating without adding new pollution-reducing equipment. Under the current law, the plants are supposed to upgrade pollution control equipment when they upgrade their operations. Energy producers have complained that upgrading pollution controls often costs too much money.

Maine has joined other Northeastern states in pushing for better enforcement of the law to stop the drift of pollution from plants in the Midwest into this region. Now, some in the state are irate about the prospect that the law itself could be weakened.

It's very discouraging to work year after year to clean up the state's air and then to have the president undo all that work just to keep his supporters in the energy industry happy, said Susan Sargent, the National Environmental Trust's Maine representative.

"President Bush should be looking out for all [the people], not just his cronies," she said Tuesday.

If Bush goes ahead with the expected changes to the 30-year-old Clean Air Act, hikers in Acadia National Park won't be able to see the horizon for all the smog and soot, and state residents will suffer for health reasons as well, Sargent said.

A study by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that the old plants trigger as many as 170,000 asthma attacks across the country annually and shorten the lives of up to 9,000 people each year.

If the Bush administration changes occur as expected, they will not be good for Maine, said Jim Brooks, director of the air bureau at the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

"If it looks like what I [expect], it's not a good thing for clean air," he said. It appears that the rule change will allow an increase in the emission of pollutants, he said.

In addition, the "new source review," the provision of the Clean Air Act that requires the plants to upgrade pollution control equipment when they expand or upgrade operations, has been a good thing. That's because it forces companies to put on "the latest and greatest" pollution controls, Brooks said.

"If the reports are true ... he'd be concerned about the impact on Maine's air quality," said Gov. King's spokesman Tony Sprague.

The governor supports more
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stringent enforcement of clean air rules and wouldn't want to see a move in the opposite direction, Sprague said.

Two years ago, King wrote an Op-Ed piece in The New York Times calling upon the federal government to make the older power plants clean up. Up to 80 percent of Maine's ozone problem is caused by pollution that is blown in from outside the state's borders.

The next year, the state supported, but did not officially join, a lawsuit filed by several other Northwestern states against the Midwestern power plants. That suit is still pending.

Nine northeastern attorneys general gathered in Washington, D.C., Tuesday to lambaste the

expected Clean Air Act rollback.

"If the federal government rolls back its rules to make it easier to keep aging high-polluting power plants alive, the Northeast will be the sacrificial lamb to increase the profits for a few Midwestern utilities," said Philip McLaughlin, the New Hampshire attorney general.

The states' top lawyers also warned Tuesday that they will sue the Bush administration if the clean air standards are relaxed.

"If the Bush administration weakens regulations governing these utilities, it will be at the expense of the health of the Maine people," said Maine Attorney General Steven Rowe.

Members of the state's congressional delegation also have called for more, not less, stringent rules.

First District Rep. Tom Allen, who sponsored legislation to take away the exemption that allows the old plants to keep operating with-

out pollution improvements, termed the expected changes "a late Christmas present to the energy industry."

He said the proposed changes would mean more asthma and more early deaths. The plants in question are the dirtiest in the country and emit one-third of the nation's carbon dioxide pollution, a major component of greenhouse gases responsible for global climate change, the Democratic congressman said.

"I would be seriously concerned if there are any rollbacks to the Clean Air Act and its regulations," Sen. Olympia Snowe wrote in an August letter to the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Maine has long fought the battle of dirty air being transported into our state, which causes well over 70 percent of our air quality problems."

Snowe, a Republican, believes all power plants should be held to the

same environmental standard, regardless of whether they are new or expand their operations, Dave Lackey, a spokesman for the senator said Tuesday.

Sen. Susan Collins opposes relaxing the law because she does not believe the required pollution controls are responsible for electricity and fuel supply shortages, as some in those industries have contended, said her spokeswoman Felicia Knight.

"Suspending enforcement of one of the country's landmark environmental laws is a false solution to the energy challenge that we are facing," the Republican senator wrote in a July letter to the EPA administrator.

Collins wrote a similar letter to Vice President Dick Cheney in April. Cheney, a former oil company executive, has been behind the push to revise the clean air standards.