

Politics

Mercury Limits on Coal Plants No Longer 'Appropriate,' EPA Says

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- ▶ Finding may make it harder to impose stringent curbs in future
- ▶ Trump administration's latest move to reverse Obama-era policy

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The Trump administration is proposing to reverse an Obama-era conclusion that limits on mercury pollution from power plants are too costly and no longer “appropriate and necessary,” a finding that could make it difficult to impose more stringent curbs in the future.

The Environmental Protection Agency is aiming to leave the 2012 standards in place, responding to a clamor from utilities that have already spent at least \$18 billion complying with the requirements.

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But in another reversal of former President Barack Obama’s environmental policies, the agency now finds that the mercury mandates cost far more than the potential benefits that would spring from paring emissions of the toxin. According to the new EPA analysis, the costs of complying with the rule are projected at \$7.4 billion to \$9.6 billion annually, while monetized benefits are estimated to be \$4 million to \$6 million annually.



That's a sharp reduction from the EPA's previous estimate that the requirements would result in widespread benefits, not just from paring mercury emissions but also by indirectly reducing nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide, leading to fewer asthma attacks, heart attacks and premature deaths.

Under President Donald Trump, the EPA now is effectively ignoring those so-called co-benefits and focusing only on the direct potential benefits from slashing mercury emissions.

Coal-fired power plants are the largest U.S. source of mercury, a metal that is converted in soil and water into a neurotoxin that can lower IQ, cause motor function deficits, damage the nervous system, and lead to more heart attacks.

Armed with the new cost-benefit analysis, the EPA is proposing it is not "appropriate and necessary" to regulate hazardous air pollution emitted from power plants under the Clean Air Act.

Environmentalists argue the two changes could limit the reach of the EPA, making it harder for the agency to ratchet up requirements for mercury pollution in the future.

The mercury standards have been the subject of litigation for years. After they were imposed in 2012, the coal industry sued, ultimately forcing the EPA to revisit its conclusions. The Obama administration reinstated the regulation in 2016 and coal miner Murray Energy Corp. sued to block it, but a federal appeals court delayed the case so the Trump administration could reconsider the rule.

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