
Originally published Friday, January 21, 2011 at 4:40 PM

Groups sue over air pollution at national parks

A group of environmentalists has sued the federal government in an effort to force a declaration on the source of air pollution over national parks and wilderness areas in the West.

By FELICIA FONSECA

Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. —

A group of environmentalists has sued the federal government in an effort to force a declaration on the source of air pollution over national parks and wilderness areas in the West.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday, contends that emissions from two coal-fired power plants on the Navajo Nation and a third in Washington state have obscured views at places like the Grand Canyon, Mesa Verde and Mount Rainier.

The nine groups have accused the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Interior Department of unreasonably delaying a response to petitions for formal certification of visibility impairment.

"If DOI and DOA were to grant plaintiffs' petitions, large sources of air pollution that are presently causing visibility impairment in many national parks and wilderness areas would more likely be required to reduce their emissions," the lawsuit said. It was filed in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency already is addressing visibility impairment under a 1999 regional haze rule that covers air pollutants from sources over a wide geographic area.

The environmental groups want the agency to use an earlier rule that can identify impairment from a single or smaller number of sources.

Both rules require an analysis of the best technology available to reduce emissions, the EPA said. But the groups contend the latter rule would mean a higher-quality analysis that, with certification, could force the EPA to act under a strict deadline.

"There's less ambiguity under this action on what is acceptable," said Roger Clark, air and energy director for the Grand Canyon Trust in Flagstaff, one of the plaintiffs.

The groups filed the first petition in May 2009, asking that the Interior Department certify that nitrogen oxide and particulate matter from the Navajo Generating Station near Page are impairing visibility at the Grand Canyon.

They followed with a second petition a month later regarding the Centralia Power Plant in Washington state, saying it was harming air quality at Mount Rainier and Olympic National Parks.

The third petition contended that the Four Corners Power Plant near Farmington, N.M., has harmed

air at 16 national parks and wilderness areas in Arizona, Utah, New Mexico and Colorado.

The EPA has proposed pollution controls for the Four Corners plant under the Clean Air Act and was expected to release recommendations for the Navajo Generating Station. The regulation of coal plants on tribal lands falls on the EPA.

"In the near future, EPA will issue a number of air rules that are vital to protecting public health and that will compliment states' efforts to reduce regional haze," said EPA spokeswoman Margot Perez-Sullivan in San Francisco. "Together, these actions will address the harmful emissions that affect our nation's most pristine areas."

The Interior and Agriculture departments declined to comment specifically on the lawsuit. But the USDA has said it would not decide on whether to certify visibility impairment regarding Navajo Generating Station until the EPA completes its analysis under the regional haze rule.

On the Four Corners Power Plant, U.S. Forest Service said its analysis shows that it causes the greatest cumulative impact on visibility of any single source.

The lawsuit seeks a court order establishing a prompt deadline for the federal agencies to act on the plaintiffs' petitions.

Jeff Holmstead, a former assistant administrator for air at EPA, said he doesn't doubt that visitors don't have the crystal-clear views they would like at national parks at wilderness areas at times.

Coal-fired power plants are a major source of pollution, but automobiles, carbon from fires, soot, windblown dust and nature also are to blame for hazy air, he said.

"I know they (environmentalists) would like to impose more controls, but I don't think there's any evidence those plants are creating any visible impact on those national parks," he said.