

US EPA agrees to schedule on several state haze plans

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The US Environmental Protection Agency by the end of next year will approve 45 state plans or impose federal requirements to reduce air pollution from old, uncontrolled power plants and other industrial facilities to improve visibility in national parks and wilderness areas, the agency said Wednesday.

EPA reached a settlement agreement with the National Parks Conservation Association, Environmental Defense Fund and other groups to set a schedule for final action on the so-called "regional haze" plans from the states. The settlement is open to public comment for 30 days and needs a judge's approval before it goes into effect.

The plans primarily target coal-fired power plants that are between 35 and 50 years old and do not include controls on emissions of sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter, said Stephanie Kodish, an attorney for the National Parks Conservation Association.

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"It targets these old, dirty facilities and it requires that they install the same kinds of controls that other newer facilities have been required to install," Kodish said in an interview.

The haze plans are expected to hit coal plants in the West hardest because they do not fall under EPA's Cross State Air Pollution Rule, which requires reductions of many of the same pollutants in eastern states, she said.

State regulators, who enforce the requirements of the Clean Air Act, must identify coal plants and other industrial sources of emissions contributing to haze problems in parks and wilderness area and require those facilities to install the best available retrofit technology to reduce SO_x, NO_x, PM and other haze-forming pollutants, according to EPA. If the state plans are insufficient to reduce haze, EPA must impose a federal plan that would require the retrofits.

Wednesday's settlement deal does not establish any requirements, but sets deadlines for when state or federal plans must be in place. A series of deadlines are established, beginning next month with required finalization of haze plans for Nevada, Oklahoma, Kansas and New Jersey.

EPA's work on all unfinished plans will be complete by November 15, 2012, according to the settlement.

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