

'Unbelievable' Timing: As Coronavirus Rages, Trump Disregards Advice to Tighten Clean Air Rules



By Coral Davenport

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A resident of Springdale, Penn., displayed coal soot in 2017 from her home, which stood near a coal-burning power plant. Robert Nickelsberg /Getty Images

WASHINGTON — Disregarding an emerging scientific link between dirty air and Covid-19 death rates, the Trump administration declined on Tuesday to tighten a regulation on industrial soot emissions that came up for review ahead of the coronavirus pandemic.

Andrew R. Wheeler, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, said his agency would not impose stricter controls on the tiny, lung-damaging industrial particles, known as PM 2.5, a regulatory action that has been in the works for months. The scientific evidence, he said, was insufficient to merit tightening the current emissions standard.

“The U.S. has made incredible strides in reducing particulate matter concentrations across the nation,” Mr. Wheeler said. “Based on review of the scientific literature and recommendation from our independent science advisers, we are proposing to retain existing PM standards which will ensure the continued protection of both

public health and the environment.”

The decision brought praise from the nation’s oil companies and manufacturers, which had said a tighter regulation on smokestack emissions of fine soot would harm their economic viability — even before the global health crisis cratered the global economy.

But public health experts say that the move defied scientific research, including the work of the E.P.A.’s own public health experts, which indicates that PM 2.5 pollution contributes to tens of thousands of premature deaths annually, and that even a slight tightening of controls on fine soot could save thousands of American lives.

Just last week, researchers at Harvard released the first nationwide study linking long-term exposure to PM 2.5 and Covid-19 death rates. The study found that a person living for decades in a county with high levels of fine particulate matter is 15 percent more likely to die from the coronavirus than someone in a region with one unit less of the fine particulate pollution.

“The timing of this is unbelievable,” said Richard Lazarus, a professor of environmental law at Harvard. “There’s this big study that just came out linking this pollutant to Covid. This seems like a colossal mistake on the administration’s part.”

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Paul Billings, a senior vice president of the American Lung Association, noted that the Harvard study came on top of other reports that linked the pollutant to premature deaths. “This pollution already kills tens of thousands of Americans every year. This is an affirmation of a standard that already does not provide adequate safeguards to public health,” he said.

Because the Harvard study was only published last week, after White House lawyers had already largely completed a lengthy review of the proposed rule, its findings are not expected to be included in the legal rationale.

However, a senior author of the Harvard report said that top E.P.A. officials were made aware of its conclusions. “Many people have been presenting our study to E.P.A. They know about it,” said Francesca Dominici, a professor of biostatistics at Harvard who led the study.

“I’m disappointed but not surprised,” she said about the administration’s announcement. “But it is an unwise decision in light of the pandemic. There has been a constant tactic over the last few years by the administration to dismiss science in general.”

Mr. Lazarus, the Harvard lawyer, said that he expected that E.P.A. would be legally required to incorporate the findings of the Harvard study into the rationale for the rule before it is made final, likely later this year. “It will eventually be part of the legal record,” he said. “Historically, Harvard’s public health studies have been central to E.P.A. public health rules.”

The proposed rule, which will be open to public comment for 60 days before being reviewed by the White House and made final, retains a standard enacted in 2012. That rule limited the pollution of industrial fine soot particles — each about 1/30th the width of a human hair, but associated with heart attacks, strokes and premature deaths — to 12 micrograms per cubic meter. By law, the E.P.A. is required every five years to review the latest science and update that standard.

When E.P.A. scientists conducted that mandatory review, many concluded that if the federal government tightened that standard to about nine micrograms per cubic meter, more than 10,000 American lives could be saved a year.

In a draft 457-page scientific assessment of the risks associated with keeping or strengthening the fine soot pollution rule, career scientists at the E.P.A. estimated that the current standard is “associated with 45,000 deaths” annually. The scientists wrote that if the rule were tightened to nine micrograms per cubic meter, annual deaths would fall by about 27 percent, or 12,150 people a year.

“The E.P.A.’s own scientific report is overwhelmingly in support of a tougher standard. It over and over again shows that the evidence of harmful public health effects from PM 2.5 are much greater than were previously known,” Mr. Lazarus said.

After the publication of that report, numerous industries, including oil and coal companies, automakers and chemical manufacturers, urged the Trump administration to disregard the findings and not tighten the rule.

In a November 2019 public comment submitted by 13 industry groups, including the American Petroleum Institute, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Mining Association and the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, the industry representatives wrote, “significant uncertainty remains about the relationship between exposure to PM 2.5 and adverse effects on public health.”

The E.P.A.’s leaders ultimately agreed with the industries’ assessment. A final version of the scientists’ report, published in January to preview the still-unpublished rule, does say the rule as it stands contributes to 45,000 deaths annually, but it also says only that tightening it would reduce “health risks,” not deaths.

In a draft of the rule viewed by The Times said that Mr. Wheeler, placed “little weight on quantitative estimates” of the mortality risk associated with fine soot pollution.

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