

Bush plans to ease smog control

Seth Borenstein

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON— The Bush administration said Wednesday that it plans to ease and delay pollution-control standards for dozens of urban areas whose smog levels would violate tough new smog rules if they were put into effect without change.

The Environmental Protection Agency's 368-page proposal would lessen smog-control requirements for about 35 metropolitan areas where 47 million people live in moderate air pollution. So long as smog remains undiminished in those areas, people there who suffer from asthma or other respiratory problems would be at risk.

The metro areas affected are mostly in the Southeast, especially in the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee, but they also include Detroit; Fort Wayne, Ind.; Cleveland-Akron; San Diego and Phoenix. These areas have excessive smog under rules proposed in 1997 that have been tied up in court ever

since. They are not too smoggy under the rules that currently are in effect, which date to 1979.

Under the EPA's proposed action, industries and governments in the affected areas could have an extra year or more to adopt pollution-control technologies to meet the tough new standard, and might not have to employ the toughest controls now required of the smoggiest cities. Standards that could be eased include requiring older polluting plants to get new emission controls, cars to be inspected and vehicles to use clean gasoline.

The standard deals only with ozone, which is commonly called smog, and not soot or acid rain. Smog results when industrial and auto pollutants are warmed in the sun.

The EPA proposes to put the 1997 smog standard — 33 percent tougher than the 1979 one — into effect in 2004.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ordered the EPA to come up with a better plan for moving from the 1979 standard to the 1997 one,

but upheld the later one's legality.

The 1997 standard measures smaller amounts of smog over eight hours; the 1979 standard measured intense smog over only a one-hour period. Scientific studies show that smog is a big health problem when it's at low levels for long periods, said Doug Dockery, a Harvard School of Public Health epidemiologist.

If the EPA didn't ease the 1997 standards, metro areas exceeding smog standards would be told in April 2004 that they are violating the law. They would then have five years to come up with plans meeting specific requirements to clean their air. Under the new EPA proposal, they could have at least six years, and maybe more.

Cities that are so smoggy that they violate both the 1979 and 1997 standards — such as Houston, Philadelphia and Los Angeles — wouldn't be affected by this EPA proposal. They already are required to take steps to reduce smog.

Environmentalists criticized the

EPA's proposal as watering down the pending standard.

David Hawkins, a former Carter administration air-quality chief who's now a top official at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, called the EPA's proposal "bad policy and illegal" because it would take away requirements that Congress put in the 1990 Clean Air Act.

Industry and business officials praised the plan.

"EPA is doing a very reasonable job," said Bob Bessette, the president of the Council of Industrial Boiler Owners. "It's going to give some flexibility that could very much help move things forward much faster and help us."

The proposal will become final at the end of the year after three public hearings in June, in Dallas, San Francisco and Washington.

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Eighteen illegal aliens die in truck trailer

David McLemore

The Dallas Morning News (KRT)

VICTORIA, Texas — The bodies of 18 undocumented immigrants, including a 5-year-old boy, were found near a truck stop early Wednesday, a few hours after authorities got a desperate, untraceable 911 call for help from inside a locked, unventilated cargo trailer. The immigrants apparently died after they and dozens of others traveled for hours in the trailer.

Victoria County Sheriff's Department officials, answering a disturbance call at the Speedy Spot truck stop at about 2:15 a.m. CDT on Wednesday, discovered the trailer nearby on a county road. It had been parked there for about an hour and someone had opened the trailer doors, officials said. Estimates of the number of immi-

grants — from Mexico, El Salvador and Honduras — who had been locked inside the truck ranged from 60 to 100. Thirty people who ran from the truck after the doors were opened later were detained by authorities.

Officials found 13 bodies inside the trailer and four bodies on the ground. Another person died later in a local hospital.

U.S. Attorney Michael Shelby in Houston said one man had been arrested, and authorities were looking for two other people. Shelby said Tyrone Williams of Schenectady, N.Y., was arrested at an undisclosed location in Bellaire, Texas, after "some pretty good detective work."

Williams, a legal U.S. resident from Jamaica, was being held at

the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in north Houston and could face charges of smuggling of illegal immigrants resulting in deaths, which can carry the death penalty.

A woman who answered the telephone at Williams' house in southeast Schenectady identified herself as his wife, Karen. She said Williams hauls produce and that most of his runs are in Texas. She said her husband is innocent. "He was victimized," she said.

As investigators combed the rural area where the trailer and bodies were found, local, state, federal and Mexican officials interviewed the survivors, who were either in area hospitals or the Victoria Community Center. The Red Cross provided beds, food and wa-

ter, and authorities said federal officials would take custody of the immigrants on Thursday.

"They're giving their locations, their addresses and their residences and we're compiling all of that data right now," Sheriff Michael Ratcliff said. "It's a slow process, and these people have been traumatized. They're not moving with information very quickly."

Officials said 15 people were treated at local hospitals and eight, two in critical condition, remained hospitalized on Wednesday evening.

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Russia remains unmoved on Iraq sanctions

Alex Rodriguez

Chicago Tribune (KRT)

MOSCOW — The first signs of a thaw in the icy dialogue between Washington and Moscow over the war to oust Saddam Hussein surfaced Wednesday, but that failed to help U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in his bid to win Russia's support for the lifting of U.N. sanctions on Iraq.

Russia's lower house of parliament ratified a landmark treaty that slashes the strategic nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States by two-thirds over the next 10 years, a vote clearly timed to coincide with Powell's visit to Moscow on Wednesday.

However, after talks with Russian

President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, Powell failed to convince the Kremlin that sanctions imposed on Baghdad 12 years ago after its invasion of Kuwait are no longer needed now that Hussein's regime has been removed from power.

Russia has yet to back away from its insistence that United Nations weapons inspectors be returned to Iraq to assure the world that the threat of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons no longer exists in the country.

"With respect to Iraq, there are some outstanding issues, and we will be working these issues in a spirit of partnership and trying to come to a solution," Powell told re-

porters at a Kremlin news conference with Ivanov at his side.

Though the issue of sanctions remained unresolved, Powell's visit to Moscow was also meant to ease tensions between both countries and set the right tone for the upcoming summit between Putin and President Bush in St. Petersburg later this month.

Relations between Washington and Moscow hit a low point at the war's outset, when Putin accused the Bush administration of replacing international law with "the law of the fist." On Wednesday, Putin said disagreements between the two countries over how the war was handled were finally behind them. "We have talked a lot, and dis-

agreed a lot, over the Iraq problem," Putin said. "But I think we have managed to safeguard the fundamental basis of our relationship, and I am hopeful that the upcoming meeting with President Bush will give a further impetus to successful development in all areas of our cooperation."

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