

EPA targets Obama crackdown on mercury from coal plants

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration on Friday targeted an Obama-era regulation credited with helping dramatically reduce toxic mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants, saying the benefits to human health and the environment may not be worth the cost of the regulation.

The 2011 Obama administration rule, called the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, led to what electric utilities say was an \$18 billion clean-up of mercury and other toxins from the smokestacks of coal-fired power plants.

Overall, environmental groups say, federal and state efforts have cut mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants by 85 percent in roughly the last decade.

Mercury causes brain damage, learning disabilities and other birth defects in children, among other harm.

Coal power plants in this country are the largest single man-made source of mercury pollutants, which enters the food chain through fish and other items that people consume.

A proposal Friday from the Environmental Protection Agency challenges the basis for the Obama regulation. It calculates that the crackdown on mercury and other toxins from coal plants produced only a few million dollars a year in measurable health benefits and was not “appropriate and necessary” — a legal benchmark under the country’s landmark Clean Air Act.

The proposal, which now goes up for public comment before any final administration approval, would leave the current mercury regulation in place.

However, the EPA said it will seek comment during a 60-day public-review period on whether “we would be obligated to rescind” the Obama-era rule if the agency adopts Friday’s find-



AP Photo/J. David Ake, File
In this July 27, 2018, file photo, the Dave Johnson coal-fired power plant is silhouetted against the morning sun in Glenrock, Wyo.

ing that the regulation was not appropriate and necessary. Any such change would trigger new rounds in what have already been years of court battles over regulating mercury pollution from coal plants.

Friday’s move is the latest by the Trump administration that changes estimates of the costs and payoffs of regulations as part of an overhaul

of Obama-era environmental protections.

It’s also the administration’s latest proposed move on behalf of the U.S. coal industry, which has been struggling in the face of competition from natural gas and other cheaper, cleaner forms of energy. The Trump administration in August proposed an overhaul for another Obama-era

regulation that would have prodded electricity providers to get less of their energy from dirtier-burning coal plants.

In a statement, the EPA said Friday the administration was “providing regulatory certainty” by more accurately estimating the costs and benefits of the Obama administration crackdown on mercury and other toxic emissions from smokestacks.

Hal Quinn, head of the National Mining Association, charged in a statement Friday that the Obama administration had carried out “perhaps the largest regulatory accounting fraud perpetrated on American consumers” when it calculated that the broad health benefits to Americans would outweigh the cost of equipment upgrades by power providers.

Sen. Tom Carper of Delaware, the top Democrat on the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee, condemned the Trump

administration’s move.

The EPA has “decided to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory” after the successful clean-up of toxins from the country’s coal-plant smokestacks, Carper said.

He and other opponents of the move said the Trump administration was playing with numbers, ignoring what Carper said were clear health, environmental and economic benefits to come up with a bottom line that suited the administration’s deregulatory aims.

Janet McCabe, a former air-quality official in the Obama administration’s EPA, called the proposal part of “the quiet dismantling of the regulatory framework” for the federal government’s environmental protections.

Coming one week into a government shutdown, and in the lull between Christmas and New Year, “this low-key announcement shouldn’t fool anyone — it is a big deal, with significant implications,” McCabe said.

Shutdown could block federal aid to farmers hit by trade war

By JULIET LINDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The end of 2018 seemed to signal good things to come for America’s farmers. Fresh off the passage of the farm bill, which reauthorized agriculture, conservation and safety net programs, the USDA last

week announced a second round of direct payments to growers hardest hit by President Donald Trump’s trade war with China.

Then the government shut down.

The USDA in a statement issued last week assured farmers that checks would continue to go out during

the first week of the shutdown. But direct payments for farmers who haven’t certified production, as well as farm loans and disaster assistance programs, will be put on hold beginning next week, and won’t start up again until the government reopens.

There is little chance of the government shut-

down ending soon. Trump and Congress are no closer to reaching a deal over his demand for border wall funding, and both sides say the impasse could drag well into January.

Although certain vital USDA programs will remain operational in the short term, that could change if the shut-

down lasts for more than a few weeks.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps, helps feed roughly 40 million Americans. According to the USDA, eligible recipients are guaranteed benefits through January. Other feeding programs, including

WIC, which provides food aid and nutrition counseling for pregnant women, new mothers and children, and food distribution programs on Indian reservations, will continue on a local level, but additional federal funding won’t be provided. School lunch programs will continue through February.

Neighbor: Midwife takes on rural care in Hermiston

Continued from Page A1

way to Spokane, but didn’t feel it was rural enough. She didn’t want to uproot her twins — currently sophomores in high school — so her husband is staying with them while she lives in Hermiston and visits on days off.

“Luckily I have a car with good gas mileage,” she said.

At work, O’Brien cares for women through the stages of family planning, pregnancy, labor and postpartum care. She said she works to understand their needs and wants concerning their birth plan, and provides education and emotional support. Everyone’s idea of a “perfect” birth is different, she said.

“I don’t force anything on them,” she said. “I’m basically listening to their concerns. Nine times out of 10, they’re going to steer you in the right direction.”

She said most pregnant women have a lot of questions and concerns about what is best for the pregnancy, and it’s important they discuss those with providers during their appointments.

“People get lots of well-intentioned but crappy advice from family members and the internet,” she said.

Women will come in falsely believing they can’t



Contributed photo by GSHCS
Catherine O'Brien moved to Hermiston in 2018 to work as a midwife for Good Shepherd Women’s Center.

eat certain foods, she said, or that they can’t take any medications at all while pregnant. A midwife can help patients sort out exactly what is considered safe or unsafe for the baby and mother during a pregnancy.

Patients at Good Shepherd Women’s Center are encouraged to have appointments with all providers during pregnancy, so that they will be familiar with whoever is on call when they go into labor. Other prac-

‘LUCKILY I HAVE A CAR WITH GOOD GAS MILEAGE’

tioners include Dr. Diana Edenfield, Dr. Leila Keeler, Dr. Allison Khavkin, Angie Hays, ARNP, and Kelli Stephenson, CNM.

O’Brien said so far in the two months she has worked there, she is highly impressed with how well-run the clinic is and how supportive the staff are to patients and each other.

“I’m very recent, but I’ve been here long enough to know that I love it,” she said.



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