

# Snowe, Collins should support Clean Air Act

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Clean air is under attack in Washington as some legislators seek to cut funding for the Environmental Protection Agency or weaken existing regulations that limit the amount of toxins that can be released by the energy industry.

About a half dozen amendments have been proposed recently to weaken the Clean Air Act or prevent the EPA from doing its job, and a budget proposal to reduce the EPA's budget by 50 percent failed this spring.

The act has held up, but now, the energy industry is in an uproar over new smog standards that will be proposed at the end of July and the EPA's proposed new limits on hazardous air pollutants from coal and oil fired power plants, under the Utility Air Toxics Rule.

Public support for clean air protections is strong – a recent American Lung Association survey shows 69 percent said they do not want Congress interfering in the EPA's authority to regulate air pollution – but some legislators have been pushing the agenda of the energy industry, calling the EPA restrictions anti-business.

We would argue this effort rises above the issue of being “anti-business,” however, and it is not unrealistic even from an economic standpoint for us to demand that every possible precaution is taken when it comes to keeping our air safe to breathe. Balance can be achieved between maintaining a healthy environment and allowing energy plants to operate.

Coal combustion accounts for 45 percent of electricity produced in the U.S. and there are more than 440 power plants in 46 states, according to a report commissioned in March for the American Lung Association. These plants are the largest point source of air pollution in the country, creating 386,000 tons of hazardous air pollutants each year, and are the largest source of hydrochloric acid, mercury and arsenic. All of these pollutants have been scientifically proven to cause damage to eyes and skin, breathing, kidneys, neurological function, and to cause pulmonary and cardiovascular disease. Many are known carcinogens as well.

Locally, the threats to the EPA's efforts to help curb this pollution have led the American Lung Association of New England to form the Maine Healthy Air Coalition, a group of more than 20 state and local public health organizations that are seeking political support for clean air. Among the members of the coalition are the American Heart Association and American Cancer Society, as well as local groups such as the Maine Academy of Family Physicians and Portland Public Health.

All of these organizations have come together in the interest of preserving everyone's right to clean air, as it's an issue that is particularly close to Maine's heart. The Clean Air Act was originally put in place in 1967, but got its teeth in 1970 when Maine's own Sen. Edmund Muskie

helped to strengthen it. In 1990, Maine Sens. George Mitchell and William Cohen were both key players in the act's reauthorization and revisions.

American Lung Association representatives note that Maine is at the receiving end of much of the country's air pollution because of our geographic position, so while we do not have any coal plants in state, we are still paying with our air quality for the energy they provide.

The American Lung Association's 2011 State of the Air report shows that more than half the people in Maine live in counties with unsafe air. York County received a failing grade for high ozone days, and none of the counties received an A, with most in the C range. This is a serious concern, and it is part of the reason the clean energy debate is heating up locally, particularly on the subject of offshore wind turbines. Even as we explore energy efficiency and "green" energy sources, the fact remains that much of this country still depends on coal for electricity, and it's a plain fact that coal produces dangerous pollutants when it is burned.

The science is clear on the dangers of burning fossil fuels, but the problem in taking action arises because of the financial ties – it will cost money for coal plants to install more advanced systems to trap emissions and for the country to move away from coal burning to cleaner energy sources. These efforts are emotional because they will eventually result in lost jobs if people are not retrained into new industries once the clean energy revolution takes hold, and in the meantime, coal plants will have to invest in new air technology.

That said, we cannot afford to sacrifice everyone's clean air for the livelihoods of a few or to save a few dollars on our electricity bill. It is a difficult reality, but just as the telegraph transition to the telephone and the horse and buggy gave way to the automobile, the time has come to move on from coal. As soon as new technologies make the transition economically feasible, the switch must be made to assure that future generations have breathable air that does not cause illnesses.

As we work diligently to develop new sources of energy that don't make it hard to breathe, we believe our legislators will find a way to balance the interests of all humanity, and of future generations, with today's powerful energy industry, particularly coal mining.

The EPA budget is scheduled to come up again for discussion in Washington after the Fourth of July break, and other bills that would impact air quality are also pending. We join the American Lung Association and the Maine Healthy Air Coalition in urging Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins to once again stand up for the average Maine citizen who has so little control over their own air quality.

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