

# What about high cost of unhealthy air?

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It seems crazy that some 40 years after Maine Sen. Ed Muskie shepherded the Clean Air Act of 1970 through the U.S. Senate, we still get hung up on whether we really can afford to meet its requirements.

Actually, it isn't "we, the people" who get stuck on the cost of keeping our air clean and healthy. Polls consistently show strong public support for the Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to impose and enforce strict limits on air pollution. A new nationwide bipartisan survey, released on June 16 by the American Lung Association, includes these findings:

- 75 percent of voters support EPA setting stricter limits on smog.
- 65 percent said stricter limits on air pollution will not damage our economic recovery; in fact, 54 percent believe upgraded standards will create more, not fewer, jobs.
- 66 percent said the EPA should set pollution standards, not Congress.

The nationwide survey of 2,400 Americans who said they were likely to vote in the 2012 election included targeted polling in Florida, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Carolina and Virginia — likely battleground states in that election.

Yet, even with such strong bipartisan polling numbers, the Clean Air Act has been under attack in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate this spring.

In the House, Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, successfully pushed through H.R. 910, the Energy Tax Prevention Act, in a 255-172 vote. Opponents renamed it the "Dirty Air Act," which seems fair enough considering the bill would:

- Block EPA from cutting carbon dioxide and other pollutants from coal-fired power plants, oil refineries and other industries. Opponents rightly point out that coal-fired plants are the largest single-source of global warming pollution in the U.S.
- Override the determination by EPA scientists that global warming pollution poses threats to public health and welfare. Opponents rightly challenge the notion that members of Congress are better informed about climate science than the EPA's climate scientists.
- Block both the EPA and states from issuing new standards for cleaner vehicles after 2017. Opponents point out that these standards, as well as the 2012-2016 standards, help reduce our reliance on foreign oil and save motorists money at the gas pump.

In the Senate, Upton's bill fell 10 votes shy of the 60 needed to overcome a filibuster, but many of its provisions turned up in four amendments to an unrelated small business bill (S.493).

Each was rejected, but it's clear that efforts in Congress to undermine the Clean Air Act have only just begun. It's no coincidence the EPA's authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions is coming under fire in both the U.S. House and Senate, given that the U.S. Supreme Court, in last week's unanimous ruling, has decisively eliminated the federal courts as an option for imposing caps on carbon dioxide and other global warming pollutants.

As moderates in the U.S. Senate, Sens. Snowe and Collins have tended to be supportive of the Clean Air Act. How could they not, given the environmental legacy of Maine Sens. Muskie and George Mitchell, and the fact that Maine's air quality is adversely affected by pollution from coal-fired power plants in the Midwest?

But politics being politics, their votes can't be taken for granted. That's why a coalition of 27 health-care and public health groups is calling on Snowe and Collins to come out forcefully in support of the Clean Air Act and defend the EPA against efforts to weaken its regulatory authority. Led by the American Lung Association in Maine, the Maine Healthy Air Campaign wants Sens. Snowe, Collins and the rest of Congress to protect Maine children and adults from unhealthy air pollution.

And let's not be fooled by the "we can't afford it" arguments. As a March 2011 report on the benefits and costs of the Clean Air Act from 1990 to 2020 shows, the economic benefits to both human health and the overall economy exceed by far the annual costs of compliance: \$2 trillion for 2020 vs. \$65 billion.

It's really quite simple: Clean air, yes or no? In poll after poll, we the people have consistently said "yes" to cleaner, healthier air.

[letters@timesrecord.com](mailto:letters@timesrecord.com)