

Clean Air Act: Just Another Trinket for Reagan to Dust Off?

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

Representatives of industry, environmental lobbyists, members of Congress and concerned citizens have been waiting for some time to see the Reagan Administration's proposal for amendments to the Clean Air Act.

Enacted in 1970, our clean-air laws have established air-pollution standards designed to protect the health of the American people; they have forced industry to control pollution from their plants and required our cars to become progressively cleaner.

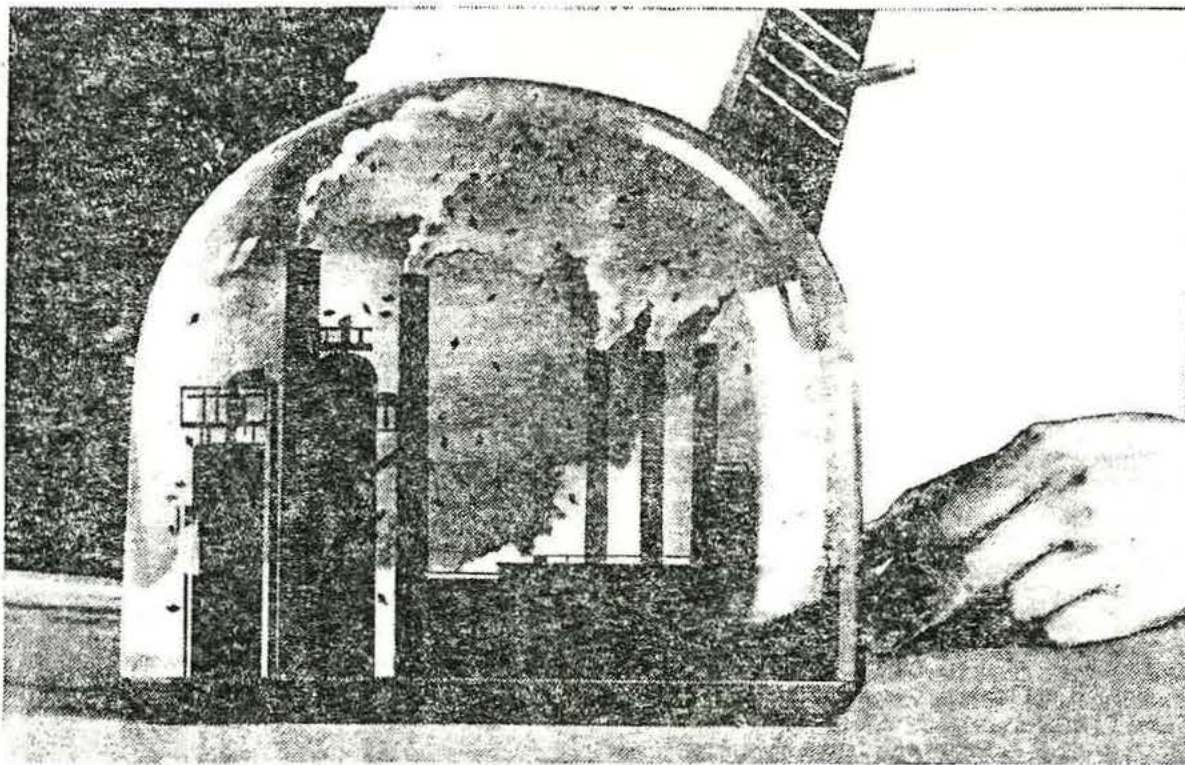
I recently obtained a draft of the proposal the Administration intends to submit to Congress this week. Even though it is only a draft, it provides the most definitive indication to date of the direction Interior Secretary James Watt and the Cabinet Council is contemplating.

In a word, the proposal would end the federal government's decade-long commitment to cleaning the air in our nation's cities. If this proposal becomes law, 140 million people who live in dirty-air areas will be permanent victims of air-pollution levels that threaten health by aggravating the incidence of heart disease, lung disease and cancer.

This proposal goes well beyond the changes that industry has publicly advocated. It goes far beyond even Vice President George Bush's publicly expressed goal of "mid-course corrections" to make application of the law more efficient and equitable, to eliminate bureaucratic delay, and to ease somewhat the regulatory burden on industry. Instead, the Administration is proposing nothing less than a blueprint for the destruction of our clean-air laws.

There is no doubt in my mind that if the President persists in this course, there will be a furious and acrimonious battle in Congress that only will delay the passage of the changes that the law truly needs.

There is, after all, no reason for fundamental changes in the Clean Air Act. It has done much to improve air quality across America without hindering our economic and energy development. The President's Commission on Coal and the National Commission on Air Quality both have concluded that we can vastly increase our use of domestic energy reserves without sacrificing the Clean Air Act. This law also enjoys the broad support of the American people—86% of them, according to a Harris Survey released earlier this month.



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But this draft proposal, currently under consideration at the highest levels of the Administration, would drastically limit the federal government's ability to protect the public health of America from air pollution.

It would do away with the federal program to clean up the air in cities where it is worst, such as Los Angeles, by repealing requirements that industries reduce their emissions until clean-air standards are met.

It would turn back the clock on auto-pollution standards, actually allowing cars in the future to pollute the air more than many of those being sold today do. The

proposal would allow, for example, a doubling of the current output of carbon monoxide, and would take no further measures to control "nox" (oxides of nitrogen).

It would permit areas that are currently cleaner than the law requires—areas that have special protection to prevent significant deterioration in air quality—to become polluted to the maximum level now allowed under the law.

It would permit states, acting on their own, to relax pollution controls for industry, setting off an ugly process in which industrial growth would go to the dirtiest

bidder. Even where clean-up technology is available and needed, industry would no longer be required to use it. New factories could be built without adequate pollution-control equipment; for example, coal-fired power plants would no longer have to use scrubbers to remove dangerous sulfur emissions.

It would do nothing to alleviate the ominous threat of "acid rain"—precipitation loaded with industrial contaminants that can fall to earth hundreds of miles from the source, sterilizing lakes and spoiling forests.

And the proposal would erect new obstacles to federal enforcement of the law against polluters. Prosecution and fines against violators would be made optional rather than mandatory.

All of these proposals contradict the basic policies that have served us well over the past decade: First, that we should make sure that new sources of pollution be as clean as possible. Second, that we should not allow the states to compete with each other by offering lenient pollution-control policies. Third, that measures must be taken to control pollution that crosses state and national boundaries.

Air pollution is a problem that cannot be controlled by the states alone, and is a problem that will not be controlled by industry. The only effective guarantee of a clean environment is a coherent national policy to curb air pollution. The Administration's proposals would essentially repudiate that guarantee.

The Administration's philosophical approach to pollution control appears to center no longer on what happens to the health of the American people, but on what the cost might be to industry.

If everyone who has a stake in clean air made his or her views known, perhaps this Administration would understand that the American people do not want to live in a land irreversibly covered by a blanket of factory smoke and auto exhaust that threatens their well-being.

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