

WSJ

8/15/89

....

Letters to the Editor

Clean-Air Bill Doesn't Go Far Enough

The Journal recently summarized the national debate over clean-air legislation as a trivial fight for air that's "cleaner than clean" ("The Hot-Air Bill," editorial, Aug. 3).

Nothing could be further from the truth—just look (or breathe) for yourself.

While the Journal tells us not to worry—the Environmental Protection Agency tells us smog levels violate federal health standards in more than 100 cities. The American Academy of Pediatrics tells us smog levels in most cities could scar children's lungs permanently. Industry tells us it annually releases 2.7 billion pounds of toxic chemicals into the air. The EPA tells us that levels of toxic air pollutants threaten adults in many areas with cancer risks as high as one in 100. And health experts from the Harvard School of Public Health tell us that air pollution contributes to one out of every 20 premature deaths in the country.

It is because our air quality is so poor that I have such strong differences with the clean-air legislation that President Bush sent to Congress last month. My criticisms of the administration proposal are based not on the very minor issues identified by the Journal, but on the fundamental inadequacy of the proposal to address these important public-health problems.

The legislation would repeal provisions protecting the national parks and other clean-air areas from ozone and nitrogen-oxide emissions. It would relax restrictions on the tall smokestacks that foil local regulators by exporting air pollutants to downwind jurisdictions. And it authorizes the EPA to exempt half of the major sources of toxic emissions from regulation—permanently.

The single biggest problem with the administration bill is its motor-vehicle provisions. "Mobile sources" (principally cars and trucks) are the main culprits in most of our air-pollution problems. They cause more than 70% of carbon-monoxide pollution, 50% of hydrocarbon pollution, 45% of nitrogen-oxide pollution, and 50% of the cancer deaths due to toxic emissions. They also contribute significantly to global warming and ozone depletion.

Yet the administration bill cut a sweetheart deal with the auto makers that relaxes many of the current motor-vehicle standards. The bill eliminates the requirement that each car meet pollution standards in favor of a program that would allow car makers to "average" the performance of vehicles. Since car-company data show that average emissions are now already well below the standards proposed in the administration bill, auto emissions

would actually be allowed to increase from today's levels.

Ironically, the administration bill is as big an economic fiasco as an environmental one. Pollution cutting is a zero-sum game. What we don't cut from cars, we have to cut from shoe factories and bakeries and other local pollution sources, where pollution control usually costs much more. Even the EPA's own estimates show that mobile-source controls that the administration bill rejected—such as requiring that catalytic converters work the full life of the vehicle (100,000 miles), or controlling gasoline evaporation and refueling emissions with "onboard canisters"—are cheap ways to get pollution reductions.

A case in point is nitrogen-oxide pollution, which contributes to smog, acid rain and particulate pollution. If the administration bill had adopted, say, the California standards for motor-vehicle nitrogen-oxide emissions, it would have removed an additional 1.3 million tons of nitrogen oxide from our skies at a cost of about \$600 a ton (\$20 a car). Now states and cities will have to get these reductions from electric utilities and industrial boilers, where the costs can be as high as \$30,000 a ton.

In certain areas, the administration deserves substantial credit. On acid rain, the administration bill opts for a "freedom-of-choice" approach that should cost-effectively reduce sulfur-dioxide emissions. And the administration supports a "clean fuels" program that will offer help to a handful of our most polluted cities.

But acid-rain controls in the Midwest are no answer to toxic emissions in Texas and Louisiana or smog levels in New York City and Atlanta. We can't solve these problems without real pollution-control mandates that are simply missing in the president's bill. What's at stake isn't air that's "whiter than white" as the Journal suggests—it's air that pediatricians say is safe for our children to breathe.

REP. HENRY A. WAXMAN (D., Calif.)
Chairman, House Health
and Environment Subcommittee
Washington

Polluted Estimates

Rep. Henry Waxman's Aug. 15 letter to the editor claims that "health experts from the Harvard School of Public Health tell us that air pollution contributes to one out of every 20 premature deaths in the country." This statement is not an accurate account of what we recently reported to the Congressional Research Service. Here are the facts:

1. EPA has estimated that as many as one in every 1,000 deaths each year (not one in 20) may be attributable to inhalation of air toxics.

2. After a careful scientific review, we found that the EPA estimate does not account for recent mechanistic information showing that low levels of air toxics are not as bad as originally thought.

3. We recommended that EPA revise their risk estimates to reflect the new scientific knowledge, and to perform more research on the effects of air pollution on nonfatal illnesses.

After reading our report, EPA administrator William Reilly wrote Congress on Aug. 10 and promised that the agency would improve its risk estimates in light of new scientific knowledge. We encourage EPA to fulfill Administrator Reilly's commitment to the use of science in risk assessment.

JOHN D. GRAHAM
Associate Professor
Harvard University
School of Public Health

Boston