

Despite industry warnings, the Clean Air Act works for everyone

Don't overturn an environmental success

BY HENRY A. WAXMAN

MOST OF OUR KIDS understand when we tell them that crying wolf works once, but never again. But that's a lesson many of our biggest industries seem to have forgotten.

Once again, they are complaining that proposed new clean air regulations will be impossible to comply with.

Under the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is required to ensure that current health-based pollutant standards reflect the best scientific information available. EPA has just completed analyzing thousands of studies focused on ozone and particulate pollution and concluded that new information justifies increased health protection.

No sooner did EPA announce its findings, however, than those in the industry coalition launched a sophisticated attack on the agency's work and the implications of tighter standards. They charged that the agency was biased and influenced by bad science, and that revised standards would bring prohibition of wood stoves, family barbecues and lawn mowers.

Scary claims, but before getting too alarmed, it's worth checking industry's crystal ball on prior clean air debates.

In 1979 — the last time EPA set a standard for smog — the American Petroleum Institute predicted that "extreme social and economic disruption" would follow and that "impossible" controls would be imposed across the country. General Motors advised Congress that the rule would cause



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"widespread inflation and employee layoffs."

EPA adopted the rule, and calamity didn't follow.

A decade later, as Congress considered the 1990 Clean Air Act, the auto industry said meeting tougher tailpipe requirements was impossible. Mobil predicted that cleaner gasoline standards would result in major supply disruptions and dramatic price increases. And DuPont reprised the classic "economic and social disruption" chestnut in lobbying against a phase-out of ozone-depleting substances.

The utility industry joined in by predicting that acid rain controls would cost \$1,500 per ton of cleanup. The industry's main trade group estimat-

ed that the entire law would cost nearly \$100 billion every year.

In fact, automakers have manufactured cleaner cars ahead of schedule, cleaner gasoline is being sold without price or supply problems, DuPont invented new substances (ahead of the law's schedule) that don't harm the ozone layer, and acid rain is being cleaned up at prices 94 percent under utility estimates.

Overall, the 1990 law is costing approximately \$22 billion, or just 25 percent of what industry predicted.

Unfortunately, crying wolf often works in Washington, and industry is at it with a vengeance. Its past tactics are forgotten, and the new industry horror stories are treated seriously by Congress and dutifully reported by the press.

That's ominous, because industry's real goal isn't just to challenge EPA's proposed standards. Its ultimate aim is to weaken the Clean Air Act's fundamental structure.

Industry lobbyists tried and failed to cripple the act in the 1980s. They are now convinced that the moment is here to repeal the law's health-based standards and replace them with ones driven by economic projections.

If the law hadn't worked, this might make sense. But the Clean Air Act stands as one of the most effective government initiatives of this century.

Not only have major air pollutants decreased nationally by 30 percent over the past 25 years, but in the same time our gross domestic product increased almost 100 percent, population rose 28 percent and vehicle miles traveled increased 116

percent.

In short, we've achieved what the public demands: economic growth and environmental progress. The Clean Air Act works because, while the standards are based solely on health considerations, costs are explicitly considered in establishing compliance schedules and cleanup options.

That means we have a clear sense of what is needed and a common-sense plan to achieve it.

If industry succeeds, it will turn the act on its head. EPA's proposed particulate standard, for example, is based on scientific studies that indicate tighter controls could result in 20,000 fewer premature deaths and 60,000 fewer cases of chronic bronchitis. But under industry's plan, those health consequences would matter less than completely unreliable cost projections.

Over the next year members of the powerful special-interest coalition will spend millions of dollars on misleading ads, lobbying and campaign contributions — all aimed at reopening the act. They are confident, especially because most members of Congress weren't in office during prior clean air fights.

Now is the time for the public to send a clear message to Congress and tell it to resist the industry juggernaut. Instead of weakening the act, we should be working to help public health experts get on with the job of making sure every American — no matter how old or young, healthy or sick — breathes safe air.

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