

Lobbyists fight clean-air rules EPA, weighing tougher emission limits, barraged by advocates for big industries

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WASHINGTON -- Big industries are waging an intense lobbying effort to block new, tougher limits on air pollution that is blamed for hundreds of heart attacks, deaths and cases of asthma, bronchitis and other breathing problems.

The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) is to decide within weeks whether to reduce the allowable amount of ozone -- commonly referred to as smog -- in the air. A tougher standard would require hundreds of counties across the country to find ways to reduce smog-causing emissions of nitrogen oxides and chemical compounds from tailpipes and smokestacks.

Groups representing manufacturers, automakers, electric utilities, grocers and cement makers met with White House officials recently in a last-ditch effort to keep the health standard unchanged. They argued that tightening it would be costly and harm the economy in areas that will have to find additional air pollution controls. Oil and chemical companies also have pressed their case for leaving the current requirements alone in meetings on Capitol Hill and with the Bush administration. A dozen senators and the Agriculture Department urged EPA not to tamper with the existing standard.

On the other side are health experts who conclude that tens of millions of people, particularly the elderly and small children, are being harmed by poor air quality. EPA said last summer that the current health standard -- no more than 80 parts of ozone for every billion parts of air -- does not provide needed protection against asthma, heart attacks and respiratory problems. EPA has estimated a reduction to 70 parts per billion could result annually in 2,300 fewer nonfatal heart attacks; 48,000 fewer respiratory problems, acute bronchitis and asthma attacks; 7,600 fewer respiratory-related hospital visits, and 890,000 fewer days when people miss work or school.

Under court order to review the standard, the EPA must decide by mid-March on what to do. "The less pollution in the air, the fewer people are going to get sick, fewer children will have asthma attacks, fewer people are going to die," said Janice Nolen of the American Lung Association. The federal health standards set air-quality benchmarks that states and local officials must strive to meet through various pollution-reduction measures, or risk federal sanctions such as the loss of federal highway money. The law says the standard must be based on protecting public health and not cost, a position the Supreme Court has reinforced. EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson has acknowledged the standard should be tightened, but he has been unwilling to go as far as health scientists say is needed to protect older Americans, children and the 20 million people that suffer from asthma.

The EPA's independent science advisory panel recommended a standard of between 60 and 70 parts per billion, as did a second EPA advisory board on children's health. Industry lobbyists and environmentalists say Johnson has taken the view that the standard should be tightened to 75 parts per billion -- an approach that doesn't satisfy industry or health experts. "It's a political compromise," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, an advocacy group. Even so, he adds, "every major industry is ... putting the squeeze on" to get the White House to leave the current standard in place. "The results vary but most studies show a steady reduction in the public health burden as the standard is tightened," said Jonathan Levy of the Harvard Center of Risk Analysis.