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Obama climate rule promises early health benefits

June 03, 2014 | By Michael Hawthorne, Tribune reporter

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By targeting the nation's biggest sources of heat-trapping pollution, President Barack Obama is seeking to help forestall droughts, floods and other disasters that are projected to become more frequent, intense and expensive as the global climate changes.

But federal rules requiring a dramatic cut in carbon dioxide emissions from coal- and gas-fired power plants also could have more immediate effects on public health in Chicago and scores of other U.S. cities with chronically dirty air.



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Though scientists say it will take years of international efforts to slow climate change, the administration's plan to curb noxious pollution emitted by U.S. coal and gas plants could have a swift impact — particularly by reducing soot and smog-forming chemicals that trigger asthma attacks, cause heart damage and take years off lives.

Winds push pollution toward the Chicago area from coal plants as close as Joliet, Romeoville and Waukegan and others hundreds of miles away. The microscopic particles can lodge deeply in the lungs and make breathing difficult, especially on hot summer days.

Setting limits on carbon emissions — and giving states flexibility to meet those targets — would encourage companies to reduce greenhouse gases by investing in carbon-free wind and solar power and adopting more aggressive energy efficiency programs, Obama said Monday after aides formally announced the administration's plans.

Many coal plants likely would either need to operate less frequently or, in some cases, switch to natural gas that burns cleaner and emits about half as much carbon dioxide as coal.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that if Obama's Clean Power Plan is adopted, the annual health benefits by 2030 would include up to 6,600 fewer early deaths and 150,000 fewer asthma attacks among children nationwide.

A separate analysis by researchers from Syracuse University and the Harvard School of Public Health found that the type of program outlined by Obama would reduce soot and smog-forming chemicals by up to 750,000 tons a year by 2020.

The president's rules wouldn't specifically limit those pollutants, but the projected decline in coal-fired electric generation would end up reducing all forms of pollution from those power plants. The biggest cuts in lung- and heart-damaging pollution would be seen in the Ohio River Valley and parts of the Midwest and Northeast that are downwind from coal plants, the Syracuse and Harvard researchers found.

Illinois, which gets about half of its electricity from coal plants, would see some of the greatest benefits, according to the independent analysis. Average concentrations of soot and smog would drop statewide.

"People don't realize there are significant additional benefits from cutting carbon emissions," said the study's lead author, Charles Driscoll, director of the Center for Environmental Systems Engineering at Syracuse. "There could be potentially huge savings in terms of reducing threats to public health."

The impact of other anti-pollution rules suggests that even slight changes in coal plant emissions can make a big difference.

When the Obama administration adopted a rule that required coal plants to reduce emissions of brain-damaging mercury, the EPA estimated it also would reduce average levels of soot by 0.36 micrograms per cubic meter of air nationwide. The EPA projected that the seemingly small change will avert 7,600 early deaths and 130,000 asthma attacks annually.

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Before outlining the administration's climate proposal Monday, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy shared an anecdote about Parker Frey, a severely asthmatic 10-year-old boy she met last month at the Cleveland Clinic. She said the boy's mother told her that air quality is so poor on some days that it is too dangerous for him to play outside.

"In the United States of America, no parent should ever have that worry," McCarthy told a room of EPA staff and environmental allies at the agency's headquarters in Washington.

Parker's mother, Kathleen Frey, said raising a son with asthma is a constant challenge.

"I hope no parent ever sits in a hospital room and watches their child turn blue like I did this past September," the Avon, Ohio, woman said during a conference call organized by the American Lung Association. "It's time to make this change."

Obama's proposal renews national efforts that foundered after the president failed to shepherd major climate change legislation through Congress in 2010. If adopted by the EPA after a 120-day comment period, the rules would impose the first limits on carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants, which are responsible for about 40 percent of U.S. emissions that contribute to rising global temperatures.

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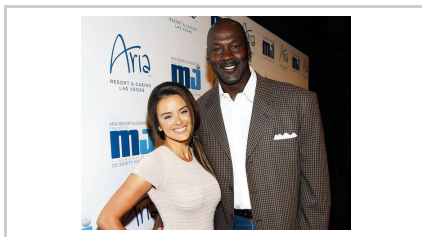


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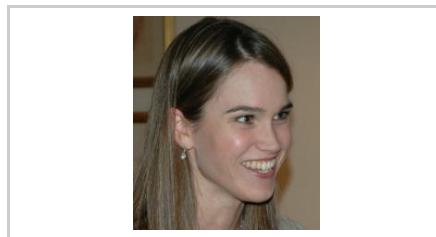
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