

War on coal? EPA warming plan under fire in House

Republicans predict job losses, EPA chief sees bid to undermine Clean Air Act

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WASHINGTON — In the first salvo of a new congressional battle over global warming, House Republicans charged Wednesday that emissions rules sought by the Obama administration would mean "higher prices and fewer jobs."

"Let's face it, these regulations and others from EPA amount to a war on domestic coal," Rep. Ed Whitfield, R-Ky., said of the Environmental Protection Agency's plan to use the Clean Air Act to curb greenhouse gases tied to warming temperatures.

"Coal is the energy source America possesses in the greatest abundance," Whitfield, chair of the Energy and Power Subcommittee that called Wednesday's hearing, added in his opening statement.

"It provides half the nation's electricity, and 92 percent in my home state of Kentucky," he said of coal, which emits more carbon dioxide than other fuels. "And it does so because it is affordable."

EPA chief Lisa Jackson followed up accusing Republicans of trying to undermine the Clean Air Act with a bill being drafted by Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., to prevent the EPA from using the act to curb greenhouse gases.

"The bill appears to be part of a broader effort in this Congress to delay, weaken, or eliminate Clean Air Act protections of the American public," she said in her opening statement.

It was Jackson's first trip to Capitol Hill since Republicans took over the House and gained more seats in the Senate — but not her last. Upton, chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, recently joked she should line up a permanent parking spot at the Capitol.

At the same time, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers, R-Ky., proposed a sweeping \$1.9 billion cut — about 18 percent — to the amount requested for EPA this year by President Barack Obama. Rogers' proposal would also shave millions from EPA programs to boost energy efficiency in household appliances and to collect data on greenhouse gas emissions.

At the core of the battle is this fact: Having failed last year to enact legislation to reduce greenhouse gases, the Obama administration is trying to now use the existing Clean Air Act to achieve its goals.

Jackson contends the law and compelling scientific evidence on global warming leave her no choice. Moreover, the Supreme Court said in 2007 that the law could be used to fight global warming.

Republicans counter regulations like those sought by the EPA would penalize industries that otherwise could be creating new jobs, and they've made the agency a central target of their anti-regulatory agenda.

Some longtime observers say the atmosphere for the agency has never been more toxic than it is now.

"It's really been quite extreme," said William Ruckelshaus, who was the first EPA administrator under Nixon

and later ran the agency under President Ronald Reagan, of the rhetoric. "What are they supposed to do? Sit there and do nothing?"

The latest and perhaps most draconian attack came from former House speaker and possible 2012 GOP presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, who called for abolishing the EPA and replacing it with an organization more friendly to business.

That followed Democrat Sen. Joe Manchin's use of a rifle to blast a hole through legislation limiting the gases blamed for global warming in a campaign commercial. The stunt helped him win West Virginia's open Senate seat.

Lawmakers of both parties have already introduced a dozen bills aimed at weakening, delaying or blocking pollution regulations. Business groups invited by congressional Republicans to describe their biggest regulatory burdens singled out EPA rules more than any others.

In 2009, the EPA under Obama put the Clean Air Act in motion when it concluded climate changes being caused by pollution from industries, automobiles and other sources burning fossil fuels are a threat to public health and welfare.

Some Republicans — and some Democrats from industrial states — aren't convinced that's the case.

There's also growing resistance to a host of other regulations expected from the agency. Some were initiated by Obama, but others are the result of courts throwing out Bush-era regulations. Still others stem from reviews required by law to update standards to reflect the latest science. They cover everything from ground-level ozone, the main ingredient in smog, to coal ash disposal, to a rule aimed at reducing pollution blowing into downwind states.

"There has been an onslaught of job-crushing regulations emerging from the EPA over the last few years," said Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., at a recent hearing of the Senate Environment Committee.

The EPA's defenders say curbing greenhouse gases will actually create jobs in clean energy industries. And they note the agency is simply following statutes aimed at protecting people's health — something they say has strong support and is necessary for a healthy economy.

"Simply put, you can't work if you can't breathe," Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., has said.