

EPA unveils new tool for tracking carbon emissions

Jean Chemnick, Environment & Energy Publishing, 1-11-12

U.S. EPA today rolled out a new database that will allow the public to track greenhouse gas emissions across a variety of U.S. sources, including power plants, refineries and manufacturers.

The database is not yet related to EPA's efforts to regulate emissions linked to climate change from those industries, but Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation Gina McCarthy said she hopes the tool will help reduce emissions nonetheless.

"We have great hopes that the information itself will be a strong driver for greenhouse gas reduction," McCarthy said on a call this afternoon with reporters.

McCarthy compared the new searchable database to EPA's existing Toxics Release Inventory, which tracks 650 toxic chemicals from thousands of sources nationwide. She said the inventory had empowered local communities and governments to take action to curb harmful emissions.

"We're really hoping that this information will do the same," she said.

"What we can bank on is that better information will lead to a better-informed public, which will lead to better environmental protection," she added.

The database includes information on emissions released in 2010 from more than 6,700 facilities. It includes only sources that emit at least 25,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide annually. Several sectors, including agriculture, are not included, but McCarthy estimated that the database reflects close to 80 percent of all U.S. emissions from stationary sources. EPA will include additional sectors in its database of 2011 emissions, bringing that total to between 85 and 90 percent, she said.

The database allows the public to search for emissions by state, sector and source.

Far and away the highest-emitting sector nationwide was the power sector, which makes up 72.3 percent of all emissions covered in the reporting. Petroleum refineries came in a distant second at 5.7 percent, with chemicals at 5.4 percent and other industrial sources at 4.9 percent.

Texas was the largest emitter among states, producing 387 million metric tons of CO₂ equivalents in 2010. Idaho and Rhode Island tied for least emissions at 3 million MMT CO₂e each.

The Lone Star State also contributed 10.2 percent of the overall emissions released by the U.S. power sector, and 30.8 percent of those from the refinery sector. Louisiana and California were also major contributors of refinery emissions at 16.8 percent and 14.1 percent respectively.

Many in the environmental and think tank communities applauded EPA's rollout.

"We've seen before that what you measure, you can manage," said Eileen Claussen, president of the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. Claussen said that with the public now able to see what sources emit, companies will have more of an incentive to reduce emissions. It will also help clean technology developers identify potential customers and inform more effective policy, she said.

"Simply getting this data out is an important step in tackling climate change," she added.

Paul Bledsoe, a senior adviser at the Bipartisan Policy Center, noted that the registry was authorized in 2007 without significant GOP opposition.

"In some ways this action represents the last vestige of the incipient bipartisanship on the climate issue that emerged in 2007 and 2008," he said.

Meanwhile, the petroleum industry pointed to its single-digit contribution to emissions to urge EPA to abandon plans for new greenhouse gas rules for refineries.

"Refineries continue to comprise a small fraction of the national greenhouse gas inventory and are already one of the most regulated industries in America," said Howard Feldman, API's regulatory affairs chief. "Air quality continues to improve, and we're doing our part."

Missed deadlines

EPA has already introduced some greenhouse gas regulations for very large emitters, and more are in the pipeline for both power plants and refineries. A proposed rule for new power plants was sent to the Office of Management and Budget for review in November, and McCarthy said EPA still hopes to release it this month.

She said the administration is working to complete the rule as soon as possible, but as no new power plants are set to receive permits in the next few months, there is no major rush.

"Frankly, we have a rule that deals with new facilities, and we don't see any reason why we couldn't be deliberative in that we don't see anything getting over the finish line in the next few months," she said.

The power plant and refinery rules are part of a court settlement with states and environmental plaintiffs, and the agency has missed several court-ordered deadlines.

But McCarthy said that while the agency is negotiating a new schedule with the plaintiffs, she does not see the missed deadlines as a problem.

"We all understand the complexity of looking at a greenhouse gas as a [New Source Performance Standards] and we want it to be right when we go out, and we'll take the time necessary to do that," she said. "But we don't feel that we missed deadlines as much as we are working with the litigants to make sure that the deadlines established will give us sufficient time to get really good proposals on the table."

[Click here](#) to see the EPA database.