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## Bush proposes requirements to cut power plant mercury pollution

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Bush administration on Monday proposed giving power plants up to 15 years to install new technology aimed solely at reducing mercury pollution, a week after science advisers said the government should be issuing stronger mercury warnings to pregnant women.

The Environmental Protection Agency's first-ever proposed controls on mercury pollution from power plants would require immediate action in some cases once they took effect by the end of 2004, senior EPA officials say. But they would be less than the limits envisioned by the Clinton administration, letting owners in some cases delay meeting requirements until 2018. They would let industry meet the first six years' goals by using pollution controls already installed to stem smog and acid rain.

Monday was the deadline for EPA to propose mercury limits for coal-fired power plants under a settlement with Natural Resources Defense Council. The council is an environmental group that had sued during the Clinton administration to force the regulations. The rule must be made final within a year.

"These actions represent the largest air reductions of any kind not specifically mandated by Congress," said Mike Leavitt, the new EPA administrator. "We are calling for the largest single industry investment in any clean air program in U.S. history."

EPA also proposed a measure for power plants to cut smog- and soot-forming chemicals from their smokestacks. Together, the programs are estimated to cost \$5 billion or more for industry to implement.

But while EPA said it was concerned about mercury, the Food and Drug Administration was told last week by a scientific advisory panel that it should provide clearer advice to pregnant women and young children on the risks from mercury in their diet.

The panel told FDA that it could do a better job of spreading word on which fish have too much mercury, particularly that white, or albacore, tuna has nearly three times as much mercury as cheaper "light" tuna.

The Bush administration mercury plan differs greatly from the Clinton administration approach. According to EPA documents obtained by the National Environmental Trust, an environmental advocacy group, the EPA in December 2001 estimated mercury could be cut by as much as 90 percent, to 5.5 tons, by 2008 if the best available technology were used under the planned Clinton regulations.

But the White House and Leavitt want to allow utilities to rely for the first six years on mercury pollution controls already installed to stem other pollutants that cause smog and acid rain.

That approach, EPA says, would eliminate about 14 tons a year of mercury emissions from the currently unregulated 48 tons a year generated by coal-fired power plants. Such plants account

for about 40 percent of the nation's mercury pollution.

After that, the proposal would cut an additional 19 tons a year of mercury emissions, EPA says. The result would be a 70 percent reduction — from 48 tons to 15 tons — by 2018, the agency says.

The Clinton administration listed mercury as a "hazardous air pollutant." The Bush administration would undo that by placing mercury — which can damage growing brains of fetuses and young children at high enough concentrations — under a less stringent category of the Clean Air Act, so it can be regulated using a program allowing companies to buy pollution credits from other plants.

"What we're trying to do is to maximize the total reduction of pollution from power plants," said Jeffrey Holmstead, head of EPA's air office. He said an interim cap on tons of mercury pollution would be set between "the high 20s to low 30s" by 2010.

Proponents frequently point to the acid rain reduction program begun in 1990 as the model for that approach. It uses market forces to reward companies exceeding pollution reduction targets. But it would mean the toughest mercury requirements would not take force until 2018.

EPA's regulation for cutting smog and soot would require power plants in 30 states to cut sulfur dioxide emissions, which contain soot and lead to acid rain, to 3.2 million tons by 2015 from current levels of about 10 million tons a year. It also would require cutting smog-forming nitrogen oxides to 1.7 million tons from current levels of 4 million tons.

Charles Driscoll, professor of civil and environmental engineering at Syracuse University, said new estimates for the Northeast show that 40 percent of lakes in New Hampshire and Vermont violate the highest EPA standard for mercury in fish.

Other research shows loon eggs in some areas of New Hampshire consistently have the highest mercury levels in North America. "Unfortunately, loons can't read fish consumption advisories." said David Evers, executive director of the Biodiversity Research Institute.

Driscoll and the New Hampshire-based Hubbard Brook Research Foundation have requested a briefing with Leavitt to present the latest science of mercury pollution.

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