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Congress endangers Clean Air Act

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ANDREW KORFHAGE • AUGUST 31, 2009 12:15 AM

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In June, the House of Representatives made history, passing the first-ever bill on climate change to succeed in either chamber of Congress.

For this, the nation should offer its praise because such action is long overdue. However, time is quickly running out for us reform our country's energy use dramatically enough to avoid the catastrophic results of our many years of hyperactive production of greenhouse-gas pollution. That's why we must demand a strengthened bill this fall when the Senate returns from recess to consider its own version of climate change legislation.



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Several sections of the House version of the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES) require correction by the Senate, perhaps none with as much imperative as ACES' limiting of the scope of the 1970 Clean Air Act. In addition to ACES' failure to fund clean energy at adequate levels, or to establish an ambitious enough timeline for carbon reduction, it actually repeals a section of the Clean Air Act that was especially designed to clean up dirty coal-fired power plants. This despite the fact that coal plants are the single most destructive source of greenhouse gas emissions. For almost 40 years, the Clean Air Act has improved our air quality and protected public health. It gives the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the authority to enforce specific emissions caps in three areas: stationary sources of carbon (power plants, factories), mobile sources of carbon (motor vehicles), and overall national air-quality standards. ACES preserves the Clean Air Act's authority over mobile sources, but grants exemptions to many others, including coal-fired power plants.

In other words, ACES capitulates to the power companies' demands to be freed from the old rules before complying with new rules. Under the new rules, so long as overall emissions targets are reached, the EPA no longer has the authority under the Clean Air Act to regulate an individual mega-polluter.

Even worse, new coal-fired plants – ones that would never be allowed under the current rules – would now be allowed to begin construction, as long as they later reduce their emissions in accordance with future goals. ACES, then, has the unintended consequence of actually encouraging

the production of the dirtiest coal plants at a time when we need to use all the tools at our disposal to dial

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This can't stand, and in fact, it makes no sense in relation to ACES' goals -- except as a capitulation to an energy industry that wants to avoid regulation.

Remember that the same Clean Air Act that gave the EPA regulatory authority over the coal plants gave it the same authority over motor vehicle emissions, and that provision remains intact. Imagine if the same model were followed for the auto industry as for coal. Suddenly Detroit would be free to produce the dirtiest gas-guzzlers imaginable -- as long as total U.S. car emissions don't rise too much, and as long as they promise to make cleaner cars in the future.

We wouldn't accept such a deal at a time when our automobile companies must either perform a clean-technology catch-up or perish, and we shouldn't accept it from our power plants either. Coal is not clean, and we've heard the coal companies' insistence that they'll use cleaner technology in the future too many times before. The simple fact is that there are no clean coal plants in existence today, and none on the horizon. The only planned demonstration plant for "clean coal" technology was canceled in February 2008, with federal officials citing its cost.

To truly mitigate the effects of climate change, we need to invest in a real transition away from the coal-based infrastructure that destroys local communities at its source and destroys the habitability of this planet at large.

We need to move toward a new energy infrastructure based on fuel sources that are clean and free forever, like solar and wind.

The Senate needs to hear that its version of ACES must leave the Clean Air Act intact, with the goal of pushing toward the day when clean and affordable renewable energy is the rule, not the exception, and coal-fired power plants become a thing of the past.

Andrew Korfhage is the online and special projects editor for Green America, the national organization advocating for a just and sustainable economy, www.greenamericatoday.org. Distributed by MinutemanMedia.org.

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[jimbo6096](#) wrote:

The title is very misleading. No one is against clean air but consider climate change is the same thing is false. First to think that man can change the climate is the utmost in arrogance. Next to think there is something wrong with carbon dioxide is foolish.
9/2/2009 3:06:54 PM

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