

EPA to issue more rules on greenhouse gas emissions

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will roll out more regulations on greenhouse gases and other pollution to help fight climate change, but they will not be as strong as action by Congress, a senior administration official said. President Barack Obama, looking to take the lead in global talks on greenhouse gas emissions, has long warned that the EPA would take steps to regulate emissions if Congress failed to pass a climate bill. The Senate has all but ruled out moving on greenhouse gases this year, even though the House of Representatives passed a bill last year.

The senior official stopped short of saying the EPA alone would achieve Obama's goal of about 17 % reductions in greenhouse gases by 2020 from 2005 levels. Analysts say the EPA will not be able to achieve the far deeper cuts needed to help prevent the worst effects of climate change such as floods, droughts and heatwaves. Though Congress will not likely move in 2010, the EPA expects it will do so in coming years. Energy companies -- from wind and solar power makers to utilities -- are concerned about the regulatory uncertainties, with some analysts saying billions of dollars of investments are stymied by the lack of direction in Washington.

The EPA has worked with the Department of Transportation to set new fuel-efficiency standards, as well as the first greenhouse gas emissions rules, on cars and light trucks. More standards for vehicles sold after 2017 are expected to be released later this month. The EPA also has moved to regulate greenhouse gases from stationary sources such as power plants and factories. Starting next year the EPA will require large power plants, manufacturers and oil refiners to get permits for releasing greenhouse gas emissions, though details are unclear. The EPA will also require industrial sources to submit analyses on the so-called "best available technology" they could add to their plants to cut emissions under the existing Clean Air Act.

The official said the EPA will put out guidance this month that would help companies determine which technologies -- perhaps moving to cleaner-burning natural gas and away from coal -- would make the most sense. In addition, the EPA is working on rules to cut emissions of mercury from coal-burning power plants and cement plants and on toughening rules on coal ash. In combination, the rules could help force inefficient coal plants into early retirement.

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