

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Safeguarding American Prosperity and People’s Livelihoods: Legislation to Modernize Air Quality Standards”

February 15, 2024

Today, we are examining a partisan Republican draft bill that would undermine core protections of the Clean Air Act. Republicans simply cannot help themselves – they continue to put corporate polluters over people.

Since 1970, the Clean Air Act has directed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set health-based air quality standards based solely on the latest science and medical evidence. The National Ambient Air Quality Standards or NAAQS essentially sets the level of pollution that is “safe” to breathe. These standards are the foundation of the Clean Air Act. They have been extremely effective for over 50 years in cleaning the air and protecting public health.

Last week, the Biden EPA strengthened the NAAQS for fine particulate matter, also known as PM 2.5. Fine particulate matter poses serious and significant health risks to our communities every day, including increased rates of heart disease and respiratory impacts. Even short-term exposure for hours or days can cause aggravated asthma attacks, acute bronchitis, and increased susceptibility to respiratory infections. This pollution is dangerous, and Americans have a right to clean, safe air. I'd like to commend the Biden EPA for fighting to protect that right with a stronger, health-based standard.

Last week’s announcement is a welcome return to pollution standards rooted in science. Under the new standard, we will see tremendous public health benefits of up to \$46 billion in 2032 alone. EPA also projects the new standard will avoid 800,000 asthma attacks, nearly 300,000 lost workdays, and thousands of premature deaths.

Now it is up to the states to develop plans to implement this more protective standard. Costs and technological feasibility are front and center in this planning – states have the flexibility to select the most efficient and cost-effective tools and measures to meet the standards. The track record of this structure has been remarkably successful: the air has gotten cleaner, the economy has continued to grow, and most importantly – public health has improved.

But the Republican majority is not interested in the Clean Air Act’s record of success. This Republican draft legislation is clearly a response to EPA upholding its duty to protect communities across the nation from dangerous air pollution like ozone and fine particulate matter.

February 15, 2024

Page 2

Today, I am sure we will hear fearmongering about the phantom costs to industry, imposed by any attempt to safeguard the health of Americans.

Time and again, my Republican colleagues have claimed this draft proposal would not increase air pollution or undermine the public health protections currently found in the Clean Air Act. They are clearly wrong. Anytime you alter the fundamental premise of the Clean Air Act – that standards should be set to ensure the air is safe and healthy to breathe – you are making our air dirtier and undermining our public health.

This Republican draft is a compilation of misguided handouts to corporate polluters, making it clear that they are only interested in finding loopholes for their friends at the expense of American families and workers. The draft would allow industry profits to override science in setting air quality standards, provide amnesty to new polluting facilities at the expense of existing ones, and remove incentives to cut pollution. It would also weaken and delay the fundamental protections in the law, virtually guaranteeing that people living in areas with poor air quality will continue to breathe unhealthy air.

Our experience with the Clean Air Act tells us that we do not have to choose between the health of our communities and a healthy economy. We can, and must, have both. Instead of wasting the Committee's time with this old proposal, we should be looking for ways to ensure EPA and the states have the resources necessary to continue to give every American clean, healthy air to breathe.

This proposal is an attack on the health and safety of Americans. And that's why I opposed this legislation in previous Congresses and continue to oppose it now.