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Pollution-cutting measure will improve air quality and public health

Clean Air-Clean Jobs Act also will further expand Colorado's vibrant clean-energy economy

DENVER — Colorado residents and businesses will see substantial benefits from cleaner air, healthier communities and a stronger clean-energy economy under sweeping legislation introduced this morning and widely supported by a diverse group of energy companies, legislators from both parties, public health advocates and conservation groups.

The Colorado Clean Air-Clean Jobs Act, first announced by the governor's office on March 5, will be heard in the House Transportation and Energy Committee today.

"This is mile-high home run for healthier air and a prosperous clean energy economy for our children and our families," said Vickie Patton, a senior clean air attorney for Environmental Defense Fund.

"Republicans and Democrats, power companies and energy producers, doctors and conservationists all have worked together to craft this smart, clean air solution for Colorado."

The measure, supported by Xcel Energy, will require the utility to dramatically reduce pollution from its aging Front Range coal-burning power plants by replacing or updating those units with cleaner sources of energy by the end of 2017, with the potential for an even faster timeline. The plants, most of which are approaching the tail end of their projected operational lives and facing potentially significant and costly upgrades, emit large amounts of a number of pollutants that are harmful to human health and the environment.

Six of the northern Front Range's eight counties, for example, get F's from the American Lung Association because of the high number of days when ozone, which can irritate lungs and aggravate asthma, reaches levels that are unhealthy for sensitive groups, including children. The Clean Air-Clean Jobs Act would lead to significant air quality improvements by cutting emissions of nitrogen, a key chemical in ozone formation, by up to 80 percent.

"This is a major step toward clearing up Colorado's skies," said Pam Kiely, the legislative director for Environment Colorado. "Air pollution has damaging and costly health impacts, and Coloradans know that clean air is a foundation for healthy communities."

Federal clean air standards for a range of pollutants are being updated to reflect the latest science on their damaging health and environmental impacts. More protective limits have been adopted or are under development for a number of health-harming pollutants, including particulates, nitrogen, ground-level ozone, haze, sulfur dioxide and mercury. The Clean Air-Clean Jobs bill establishes a coordinated, business-friendly platform for Xcel and other energy companies, state health and energy officials and the public to get ahead of these new mandates in a way that will minimize costs and maximize pollution reductions.

By developing new Colorado energy policies that focus on resources with lower or no emissions, the measure also will help drive an expansion of clean energy technologies such as efficiency measures and wind and solar power.

“This bill creates a coordinated framework to reduce air pollution in an efficient and cost-effective way,” said John Nielsen, the energy program director at Western Resource Advocates. “It will result in cleaner air and healthier communities and will further strengthen Colorado's position as a clean-energy leader.”

Groups involved in helping develop the bill praised the collaborative effort that went into finding a solution to air pollution problems that also fosters gains in the clean energy economy.

“This effort will once again make Colorado a leader that others states will follow,” said Pete Maysmith, executive director of Colorado Conservation Voters. “By working with a diverse group of stakeholders and elected officials to clean up our air before decisions are dictated from Washington, everyone wins. In an era where too many people are frustrated by too little progress on the key issues, this ground-breaking plan is a breath of fresh air.”

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