The EPA’s Myopia on Wood Heat

John Ackerly, president of the Alliance for Green Heat, provides his take on the recently proposed U.S. EPA regulations for residential wood heaters.

By John Ackerly | January 29, 2014

In the recently proposed U.S. EPA regulations for residential wood heaters, one word is noticeably absent: “renewable.” Nowhere in this 364-page document is there any hint that this form of energy has potential for displacing fossil fuels.

These new regulations are shaping up to be a battle between industry and air quality agencies, when it could be a major step for the EPA to support a far cleaner renewable energy sector. This country needs stricter emissions regulations for residential wood heaters, and these regulations will accomplish that. But we also need policies and programs to help us get there, and to support the cleanest and most efficient wood heaters.

The EPA team members working on these regulations are quick to say that is not their job. They are air quality regulators. They should not forget that their division, the office of Air and Radiation, does a lot to promote renewable energy, not just regulate pollution from energy. A prime example is the Green Power Program, which partners with businesses and encourages them to reduce their energy needs and switch to renewable energy.

One problem is that the head of the Office of Air and Radiation, Janet McCabe, is still only an acting head and has not been confirmed. In late December, President Obama said he would formally nominate her to head the Office, and she may face a tough confirmation hearing.

McCabe’s foremost challenge will be regulating coal-fired power plants, but she should not deal with wood as if it’s coal. She should use her leadership to oversee the process of developing strict emission standards, while also acknowledging and supporting the role biomass plays in providing a renewable, and more affordable source heat than fossil fuels.

Acting Administrator Janet McCabe should also hold high-level meetings with the U.S. DOE and USDA to find how those agencies can help industry to achieve these proposed strict emission limits. There may be existing programs or discreet new ones that can help advance this sector, such as loan guarantees or grant programs for research and development and testing.

A green label for wood heaters is the other vehicle that is crucial to this movement. The EPA should be providing far more leadership and resources to help establish such a label. There are good reasons why the label does not fit under the Energy Star program, but if the EPA and others had worked to develop a label years ago, the industry would have had a reason to develop and market far cleaner and more efficient appliances. No one knows better than the EPA that requiring minimum standards is only half the battle. The other half is promoting the top end of the appliance spectrum that helps consumers and the environment.

The EPA needs to be a leader in promoting this renewable energy to show rural America that it is not just concerned with technologies that wealthy families can afford, but also willing to support the mostly widely deployed residential renewable energy equipment popular with low-and middle-income families. In the absence of federal leadership, states are stepping in to incentivize and support wood heat. Compare the stark difference between the EPA that rarely mentions the positive benefits of wood heat with New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s State of the State address in early January:

“Biomass fuel combines economic and environmental benefits. It is considerably cheaper than heating oil—pellets are half the price of oil and locally sourced fuel keeps New York’s energy dollars circulating in the local economy. Many New Yorkers will see significant savings in their heating bills using these efficient, low-emission technologies.”

Although the EPA did not use the word “renewable” once in its 364-page proposed rule, it did mention it in the 222-page Regulatory Impact Statement. Unfortunately, it used the word incorrectly, referring to a “renewable energy tax rebate” for wood heaters (there has never been a federal renewable energy tax rebate). It was probably a reference to the now-expired Energy Efficiency tax credit under section 25C of the tax code.

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