

Energy and Environment

Scientists: EPA's curbs on coal-burning will save thousands of lives

By **Joby Warrick** May 4

The Obama administration's proposed curbs on coal-burning power plants could prevent thousands of deaths each year from heart attack and respiratory disease, scientists said Monday in the first peer-reviewed study to examine the measure's health impacts.

Many parts of the country could see immediate improvements in air quality as a side-effect of the Environmental Protection Agency's proposed "Clean Power Plan" regulations, which are primarily intended to cut greenhouse gas emissions linked to climate change, the researchers said in a study published in [Nature Climate Change](#).

Depending on implementation, the proposals could prevent about 3,500 premature deaths a year, mostly from respiratory disease, said the study's authors, scientists from Harvard and Syracuse universities and four other institutions.

"The bottom line is, the more the standards promote cleaner fuels and energy efficiency, the greater the added health benefits," said [lead author Charles Driscoll](#), a professor of environmental systems engineering at Syracuse.

The finding comes as the Obama administration deliberates over the final shape of the proposed rules, which have drawn a fierce backlash from the Republican-controlled Congress. GOP lawmakers are gearing up to battle the measures on Capitol Hill and in the courts, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has written letters to the governors of all 50 states urging them not to support the regulations. McConnell has called the proposals harmful to the coal industry and the economy.

Pro-coal organizations criticized the study for failing to examine a wider range of impacts, including local economic costs. Laura Sheehan, senior vice president for the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, said shuttering some of the nation's coal-fired power plants could increase utility bills for poorer consumers. She also suggested that the EPA's plan could lead to temporary shortages of electricity, an assertion made by industry-backed studies but disputed by several independent analyses.

"Taking coal power offline will lead to electricity disruptions including blackouts, brownouts and rationing," Sheehan said.

The EPA's Clean Power Plan seeks to cut emissions of carbon dioxide largely through stricter limits on the coal-fired power plants, one of the country's largest sources of greenhouse gas pollution. The rules, a key component of the administration's climate-change strategy, are due to be finalized in mid-summer.

But while carbon dioxide is the focus of the EPA's regulations, other kinds of air pollution also would be reduced if the rules go into effect, according to the Nature study. The researchers attempted to measure the health impacts from lowering emissions of sulfur dioxide, soot and other pollutants that come from coal-burning.

The study compared different implementation scenarios and found that a robust standard — roughly similar to the one outlined by the EPA when it unveiled its proposal last year — would result in substantial, and rapid, improvements in air quality, along with a sharp drop in deaths from heart attacks and respiratory ailments. The most significant gains, the report said, would occur in states such as Texas and Ohio, home to some of the most vociferous opponents of the proposed regulations.

“An important implication of this study is that the largest health benefits from the transition to cleaner energy are expected in states that currently have the greatest dependence on coal-fired electricity,” said co-author Dallas Burtraw, a senior fellow at Resources for the Future, a nonpartisan research institute.

Pro-coal organizations criticized the study for failing to examine a wider range of impacts, including local economic costs. Laura Sheehan, senior vice president for the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, said shuttering some of the nation's coal-fired power plants could increase utility bills for poorer consumers. She also suggested that the EPA's plan could lead to temporary shortages of electricity, an assertion made by industry-backed studies but disputed by several independent analyses.

“Taking coal power offline will lead to electricity disruptions including blackouts, brownouts and rationing,” Sheehan said.

The EPA on Monday welcomed the Nature study as a validation that its Clean Power Plan “is on the right track,” spokeswoman Liz Purchia said.

“These benefits are in addition to the benefits that will be realized by addressing a changing climate,” Purchia said in a prepared statement. “Overall, the proposed Clean Power Plan's billions of dollars in health and climate benefits would far outweigh the projected costs.”

This post has been updated.

Also in Energy & Environment:

[The best place for solar panels may not be your roof, says MIT study](#)

[Why you shouldn't wash your dishes by hand](#)

[Surprising new study suggests that flying may be greener than driving](#)

Joby Warrick joined the Post's national staff in 1996. He has covered national security, intelligence and the Middle East, and currently writes about the environment.
