

Lawmakers fault State of the Union claim about emission cuts

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WASHINGTON -- In a new challenge to the veracity of President Bush's State of the Union address, Democratic lawmakers say he misstated the facts when he said his air-pollution plan would cut dangerous power-plant emissions 70 percent by 2018.

Four Democratic House members said in a letter to Bush that a technical analysis by the Environmental Protection Agency in September 2002 _ four months before the speech to Congress _ concluded that the administration's "Clear Skies" proposal would cut emissions of three key pollutants by an aggregate of just under 65 percent by 2020.

But in his speech in January, Bush said: "I have sent you Clear Skies legislation that mandates a 70 percent cut in air pollution from power plants over the next 15 years."

The letter _ signed by Reps. Tom Allen of Maine, Ed Markey of Massachusetts, Frank Pallone of New Jersey and Lois Capps of California _ asserts that the EPA analysis "that was available before the State of the Union address reveals that this statement is simply not true."

An updated analysis released by the EPA last month estimated the aggregate reduction for the three pollutants _ sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and mercury _ under Bush's plan would be 63 percent by 2020.

Furthermore, four EPA air-pollution experts who briefed the House Energy and Commerce Committee last month on the updated analysis acknowledged during the briefing that a 70 percent reduction in pollution is possible "maybe in 2025," seven years later than the president claimed, according to the House members and a congressional aide who attended the session.

"Unfortunately, with this administration if you want accurate information you have to watch carefully what they say and, if it's not credible, you have to challenge it," Allen said. "We need more candor and less spin on whole range of issues."

EPA spokeswoman Lisa Harrison said in an interview that the agency and the White House "certainly stand by" Bush's assertion in the speech that the Clear Skies plan "mandates" a cut in air pollution of 70 percent over 15 years.

But "mandating" a cut in air pollution is different than "achieving" that cut, Harrison said.

"They (the House members) are really mixing apples and oranges," Harrison said. "What the president's legislation says is that we 'mandate' a 70 percent cut in air pollution from power plants over the next 15 years. That's what the legislation says ... to say all of that 70 percent reduction would be achieved in those 15 years is not what the legislation says."

Another EPA official who participated in the interview, but asked not to be quoted by name, confirmed that the agency predicts pollution reductions will be "achieved" in "2020 or thereabouts."

"They are starting to parse their sentences," said Frank O'Donnell, executive director of the Clean Air Trust, an environmental group that has been critical of the Clear Skies plan. "They tried to leave the impression in the State of the Union address with the American people that the plan would achieve the reductions in 15 years, but it just isn't so according to EPA's own analysis."

Harrison confirmed that the agency vetted the president's speech in advance and approved the statement on the Clear Skies plan. The official in charge of approving the statement was EPA Assistant Administrator Jeffrey Holmstead, who oversees air-pollution matters.

Separately, Holmstead _ an attorney who represented electric-power companies before his appointment to the EPA _ has been under fire from members of Congress and environmentalists who say he withheld scientific data that shows competing legislative proposals would reduce pollution more than the administration's plan.