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Bad Air Days

A report from the National Academy of Public Administration, a congressionally chartered review organization, gives Maine new ammunition in its fight to get old power plants downwind to reduce their pollution.

The NAPA report is blunt in its assessment - the New Source Review is "not having the positive effect on the health of individuals, or on the quality of the nation's air, that Congress intended." New Source Review was a 1977 change to the Clean Air Act that required new power plants and factories to have the most up-to-date pollution controls. Old, coal-fired power plants were exempted from the rule on the assumption that they would soon be out of business. Twenty-five years later, these facilities are still in operation, and still spewing pollution. Rather than address this problem comprehensively, the Bush administration last year made some needed streamlining of the rule but also made it easier for companies

to expand or modernize old plants without installing new pollution controls as previously required.

This is wrong, the academy said. The panel's first recommendation is to abolish the grandfather clause that allows the country's oldest, dirtiest power plants to remain in operation. New pollution controls must be installed in these facilities within 10 years, it concluded.

Maine and other northeastern states have long been embroiled in lawsuits to compel power plants and other facilities in the South and Midwest to clean up. The leaders of Eastern Canada have also joined the effort. So far, only more dirty air has drifted this way.

With the NAPA report in hand, the state's congressional delegation must now redouble its efforts to enact changes in federal law to clear the air. Rep. Tom Allen was the author of federal legislation to close the grandfather loophole. Maine Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe were leaders in pushing bills to reduce the four major air pollutants and to reduce dangerous mercury emissions. These reforms must pass through Senate committees with chairmen from states with old power plants. But as the evidence mounts, Maine's state and federal policymakers know that the facts are on their side. Even an ill wind stops blowing eventually.