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EPA tries to clear air in parks

By Traci Watson, USA TODAY

SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK, Va. — Park ranger Christi Gordon stands atop Hawksbill Peak, the highest point in this popular park, and surveys the terrain. Normally she'd be looking into West Virginia, 30 miles away. Today she can't even make out the next few ridges.

"We should be able to see the Allegheny Mountains," says Gordon, the park's air-quality specialist, as she peers into murky, grayish air draped like dirty gauze over the scenery. "More and more often, we see hazes that look like what we're seeing today."

The lousy air at Shenandoah during the summer is not an aberration. The air in national parks across the USA is sullied with smog, haze and even toxic mercury. Much of that pollution comes from vehicles, power plants and

Scientists estimate that visibility once ranged as far as 90 miles in the East and 140 in the West. Now visibility averages 18-40 miles in the East and 35-90 miles in the rural West.

"Visibility is impaired in all the parks," says John Bunyak, a branch chief in the National Park Service's air resources division. "It's pretty frustrating if you load up the family vehicle and drive a thousand miles to get there, and the pollution's socked it in and you can't see it."

In 1999, the Environmental Protection Agency released a rule that requires the air in 156 national parks and wildernesses to be pristine. To give companies more time to achieve this goal, the EPA set the compliance date for roughly 2070. This week, EPA chief Christie Whitman may take the next step toward giving that requirement some teeth.

Whitman is expected to begin the public comment phase for a proposal that obliges polluters to install emissions-control equipment — or to pay others to reduce their emissions.

Whitman's proposal is based on one that the Clinton administration wrote but didn't have the time to publish. It was put on hold by the Bush administration in January.

In late May, Whitman said she would sign the proposal. Before she could do so, the White House asked to review the rule again.

Whitman's proposal is likely to affect more than 20 kinds of facilities, from power plants to smelters to pulp mills. States would have to list eligible facilities that could emit more than a specified level of air pollution and that



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were built between 1962 and 1977.

Since air pollution can travel great distances, the proposal will affect essentially all U.S. facilities of a certain size, type and age, not just those near national parks.

Electric companies oppose the proposal, at least as it was written by the Clinton administration. They say it would require them to install technology that costs hundreds of millions of dollars, which could force electricity prices to rise.

They also don't want another emissions rule added to existing air-quality regulations.

"We're going to be improving air quality substantially," says John Kinsman of the Edison Electric Institute.

The air in the parks started to fill with pollutants decades ago. But only recently did the Park Service get good air-quality data. Among findings:

- At Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in California, haze blocks visitors' view of the Coast Range 100 miles away. "I often describe it as soup, because it's so dark sometimes," says Annie Esperanza, the parks' air-resources specialist.
- At Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina, the air is dirty with emissions from the eastern USA. Since mid-1998, "we've had about 135 unhealthy (air) days, which is ridiculous for a national park," says air-resources specialist Jim Renfro. "There shouldn't be any unhealthy air days."
- At Acadia National Park in Maine, mercury drifts in from coal-burning

"Because of the way the meteorology works, we're on the receiving end of great plumes of pollution," says Acadia physical science technician William Gawley.

Air quality is improving in many parks and rural areas, says William Malm, a research physicist for the Park Service. For example, levels of the haze-forming pollutants called sulfates, emitted mainly by power plants and industrial boilers, have dropped over the last decade across much of the country.

But environmentalists say there's a long way to go. They're also worried about the section of President Bush's energy plan that emphasizes the importance of electricity from coal-fired power plants. These plants are a major source of pollution in parks in the eastern USA.

In Shenandoah, the air should get cleaner when a nearby power plant finishes installing scrubbers, which remove pollution from the plant's exhaust. But pollution will still roll into the park from other factories, boilers and power plants as far away as the Ohio River valley.

From atop Hawksbill Peak, "it was almost like I was looking through a translucent piece of paper," says visitor Stephen Michaud, a drum teacher from Hudson, N.H. "I couldn't even make out the outline of Old Rag, which is a pretty nearby mountain. I was hoping it would be quite a bit clearer."

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