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California air board to consider smog plan faulted by critics

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LOS ANGELES – With looming deadlines to clean up the country's dirtiest air, California air regulators are expected to approve a strategy they say will allow the state to meet federal clean air standards.

The state Air Resources Board and local air pollution control districts have been developing a plan on how to meet new federal air quality standards for ozone and airborne fine particles, which have been blamed for causing asthma and aggravating other respiratory ailments. On Friday, the board will vote on the current draft of this plan, which is due to the Environmental Protection Agency this month.

Environmentalists and local regulators, however, say the current draft does not go far enough and will not clean up the air in the next 15 years. And this, they say, will make Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's plan to cut air pollution in half by 2010 a hollow promise.

“The best way to encapsulate this is a baby born today will not be breathing clean air until they graduate from high school,” said Tim Carmichael, senior policy director for the Coalition for Clean Air and the father of a toddler. “Not only are they not going to be breathing clean air until they graduate from high school, there's a significant chance they'll develop asthma from air pollution.”

State officials disagree.

“We're confident we will meet federal deadlines,” said Air Resources Board spokeswoman Karen Cesar. “It's a very aggressive and ambitious plan”

The Clean Air Act gives federal and state regulators authority over mobile sources of pollution such as cars and ships, while local air districts oversee stationary sources including power plants. The law requires areas with unhealthy level of ozone, carbon monoxide and particulate matter to develop plans explaining how they will meet federal air quality standards.

Elements of these plans are developed by local air districts, which are then forwarded to the state board for review and approval.

Last week state regulators approved a plan asking the federal government for an 11-year extension to bring the San Joaquin Valley region in line with current ozone standards. A decision about a similar proposal, which would give the south coast air basin a three-year extension to meet ozone standards, has been postponed until the fall.

Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said the biggest problem with the state's plan is that it falls short of achieving the fine particulate standard by 63 tons of nitrogen oxide emissions per day in the south coast air basin alone. Nitrogen oxide emissions are an important element in particulates.

Atwood said the district outlined a plan that would allow the state to make up for the shortfall that includes changes to the vehicle smog check program, reducing ship emissions and greater turnover of heavy duty truck fleets. State regulators, however, believe the local agency needs to do more to deal with pollutants from wood-burning fireplaces and charbroiling at restaurants, he said.

“We think there's no reason for delay,” Atwood said. “We're urging them to adopt our plan.”

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