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Trump to end 'war on coal' with rule replacing Obama-era Clean Power Plan

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President Trump was met with enthusiastic cheers Tuesday in West Virginia after moving to snuff out the “war on coal” by replacing the Clean Power Plan, even as Democrats prophesied that scrapping the never-implemented Obama-era rule would be catastrophic.

“We are putting our great coal miners back to work,” Mr. Trump told the crowd in Charleston. “We love clean, beautiful West Virginia coal. We love it.”

Mr. Trump made the comments hours after the Environmental Protection Agency announced that it would seek to substitute the long-dormant Clean Power Plan with the newly proposed Affordable Clean Energy rule, which would give states greater authority over reducing greenhouse gas emissions from coal-fueled power plants.

Three thousand miles away in California, the proposal was met with an outcry. Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, blasted the move as a “declaration of war against America and all of humanity” and Rep. Barbara Lee, another Democrat, warned that the rollback “will kill people.”

“President Trump’s decision to replace the Clean Power Plan with weaker rules governing power plant emissions is the latest in a string of terrible decisions that undermine our fight against global warming, lower our quality of life and endanger lives,” said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, California Democrat.

Announced in 2015, the Clean Power Plan was frozen in February 2016 by a Supreme Court stay after 27 states and dozens of industry groups sued to stop the tight emissions restrictions, arguing that the sweeping federal rule unlawfully usurped the role of the states in controlling their electricity production.

The EPA estimated that replacing the Obama administration rule with the ACE Rule would result in \$400 million in annual economic benefits by reducing the compliance burden while promoting energy independence, economic growth and job creation.

At the same, the agency said the proposal could benefit the environment by potentially reducing 2030 carbon dioxide emissions by 1.5 percent from projected levels, “the equivalent of taking 5.3 million cars off the road.”

Environmental groups denounced the proposal, dubbing it “the dirty power plan” and “Trump’s gift to coal barons,” while the coal industry and free market groups praised the administration’s long-anticipated move.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell expressed relief at the prospect of scrapping the Obama-era plan, which he described as an effort to “impose their radical agenda unilaterally.”

“The Obama administration’s so-called Clean Power Plan offered a typical story from that era,” said the Republican from coal-producing Kentucky. “An innocent-seeming name. A pleasant-sounding objective. But underneath, an intrusive regulatory regime — built not on effective policy, but on far-left ideology. That’s why I am so grateful that, today, the Trump administration is unveiling its plan to pare back this unfair, unworkable and likely illegal policy.”

House Speaker Paul D. Ryan, Wisconsin Republican, called the Clean Power Plan “just an absolute nightmare for coal country.” He lauded the Trump administration’s proposal as “a better path to responsible energy production that is good for jobs and household budgets.”

Predictions of premature deaths

But Democrats warned that the damage would be devastating. They cited a scenario within the EPA’s lengthy analysis projecting that the Trump plan, compared with the never-enacted Obama plan, would increase the number of premature respiratory deaths by 470 to 1,400 by 2030.

Predictions of “premature deaths” were rampant. Rep. Michael F. Doyle, Pennsylvania Democrat, said the president “wants to allow more greenhouse gases and deadly chemicals into the air, leading to 3,600 more premature deaths a year.”

Sen. Kamala D. Harris, California Democrat, said dismantling the plan “could cause hundreds of premature deaths each year due to increased air pollution.”

Sen. Bernard Sanders, Vermont independent, tweeted: “Mr. Trump: You are threatening not only this generation, but you’re threatening the lives of our children and grandchildren.”

The EPA pointed to another analysis comparing the proposed ACE with “the world as it is” instead of with the Clean Power Plan, which “was stayed and never implemented.”

“Compared to the world as it stands now, the ACE rule will result in dramatic reductions in emissions, including CO₂, mercury, and fine particulate matter precursors, as well as any resulting mortality and morbidity effects (like asthma hospitalizations),” an EPA spokesman said in a statement.

Myron Ebell, director of the Center for Energy and Environment at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, countered by calling into question the EPA analysis, which was based on models predicting the level of tiny airborne particulates known as PM 2.5.

“The claims are based on bogus research that has not been reproduced that fine particulate matter (or soot) is a major health threat at levels below the level found safe by EPA,” Mr. Ebell said. “There are air pollutants that potentially harm people at any level, but fine particulate matter isn’t one of them.”

He said the estimates of increased asthma attacks was “especially ridiculous because the number claimed is so small compared to the total number of attacks annually as to be statistically negligible.”

At the same time, he said, access to cheap, reliable energy from coal-fired plants has its own health benefits, particularly for low-income households.

“More affordable electricity for heating and cooling will have a much bigger positive health effect on poor Americans struggling to pay their energy bills than any negative effects of minuscule increases in air pollution,” said Mr. Ebell.

Patrick J. Daniels, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for the Study of Science, described the science behind the analysis as “highly suspicious” and pointed out that the United States has been lowering its greenhouse gas emissions for years.

“With its existing power grid, the United States has reduced its carbon dioxide emissions more than any nation on Earth since 2005,” “We did it without the Clean Power Plan. We did it absent any global enforceable agreement on carbon dioxide. So maybe doing what we have in the past will likely continue the reductions in emissions.”

The biggest reason: The flood of domestically produced natural gas from hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, which has made it economically feasible for power plants to convert from coal to the cleaner-burning — and cheaper — fossil fuel.

Natural gas has dethroned coal as America’s chief power source, making up 31 percent of the fuel supply last year and during the first four months of 2018 compared with 27 percent for coal, according to the Energy Information Administration, the Energy Department’s data arm.

The Clean Power Plan, the centerpiece of President Obama’s climate change agenda, aimed to cut carbon pollution from the electricity grid by 32 percent from 2005 levels by 2030.

While climate groups embraced the plan, critics decried it as all pain and no gain. The Cato Institute found that the regulations, using the EPA’s climate model, would have reduced global temperatures by less than two-hundredths of 1 degree Celsius by 2100.

Foes also argued that the plan would have come at a steep price to consumers. A Heritage Foundation analysis concluded that the regulations would have increased electricity prices by 13 percent to 20 percent and killed 400,000 manufacturing jobs.

The EPA is slated to take comments for 60 days and hold a public hearing on the proposed rule after its publication in the Federal Register.