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Thursday, June 17, 2010

EPA is asked to impose air pollution limits on coal mines

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Coal mines could face limits on the amount of air pollution they emit if a petition submitted Wednesday to the Environmental Protection Agency succeeds.

Methane, the second-most common greenhouse gas in Earth's atmosphere, as well as several other pollutants dangerous to human health are released when coal seams are exposed and the mineral is removed, processed , transported and stored.

Nationally, more than 10 percent of methane emissions come from coal mines, according to a 1999 EPA report, and methane is at least 20 times, and as much as 74 times, more effective at trapping heat than is carbon dioxide. Methane also contributes to smog formation.

Nevertheless, EPA has not regulated the emission of methane and other air pollutants from coal mines despite having authority under the Clean Air Act to do so.

“Coal mines have gotten a free pass for far too long,” Kassie Siege, a spokesperson for one of the petitioners, the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a news release. “It’s essential to establish these common-sense rules to reduce air pollution from coal mines – including closed mines no longer producing coal – while we transition as rapidly as possible away from reliance on dirty, dangerous, coal-fired power.”

The petitioners, who also include the Sierra Club, WildEarth Guardians and the Environmental Integrity Project, argue that coal mines are a "stationary source" under the Clean Air Act and, accordingly, EPA must impose a "standard of performance" that caps air pollutant emissions in a manner consistent with the best available and proven system of emission controls.

But the mining industry maintains that there is too little environmental benefit to be gained from regulating releases of it to the atmosphere.

"It is hard to see the environmental justification for the likely compliance costs involved," Luke Popovich, a spokesperson for the National Mining Association, said.

EPA has said that, among all greenhouse gases, control of methane emissions is likely to result in the fastest short-term reduction in atmospheric accumulation of heat-trapping compounds.

Methane has "the greatest mitigation potential," according to a 2006 report prepared by the agency.

Coal mine operators already engage in efforts to limit the amount of methane released inside of an underground mine because the gas is explosive. They do this by ventilating the gas to the air or by subjecting the coal to a "de-gasification" process.

In surface coal mines, which account for about 22 percent of methane emissions caused by the industry, little or no efforts to prevent fugitive methane releases are undertaken.

Abandoned coal mines also emit methane, and EPA estimates that the portion of the industry's total methane emissions from the hundreds that are characterized by a significant concentration of the gas is around eight percent.

Coal mines also emit particulates, volatile organic compounds, and nitrous oxides, which are also subject to regulation under the Clean Air Act.