

UNITED STATES SENATE

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Senators Push Administration for Action to Protect Air Quality *Letter to President Obama Outlines Risks to Public Health as well as Benefits to Action*

Washington, D.C. – A group of U.S. Senators today urged the Obama Administration to take action to protect our air quality and public health. U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) was joined by Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), John Kerry (D-MA), Frank Lautenberg (D NJ), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Joe Lieberman (I-CT), and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) in sending a letter to President Barack Obama expressing concern for the Administration's continued delay in setting a health-protective ozone, or smog, air quality standard.

In their letter, the senators urged the President to follow the requirements of the Clean Air Act, the peer-reviewed science, and the federal Clean Air Science Advisory Committee (CASAC), and to set a strong standard as soon as possible.

"It is time for our legal framework for addressing pollution to catch up with the science of ozone hazards, and the reality of illness and reduced productivity that so many of our constituents face on bad ozone days. We urge the Administration to stand strong against efforts to weaken the Clean Air Act, to follow the health science, and to protect public health, by strengthening the ozone standard to a level recommended by the CASAC," said the senators in the letter.

A recent poll conducted by the American Lung Association found that 75% of voters across the political spectrum said they favor the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) setting stricter standards on smog. Failure to reduce ozone at the source causes significant economic and human costs such as premature death, missed days of work and school for respiratory ailments, and reduced productive capacity of the chronically ill. Meanwhile, the EPA estimates that setting an ozone air quality standard within the range recommended by the CASAC would result in health and economic benefits of \$13 billion to \$100 billion (in 2006 dollars) in 2020, and save 1,500 to 12,000 lives.

The full text of the letter is below:

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President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We write to express our disappointment at the Administration's continued delay in setting a health-protective ozone air quality standard. We urge you to follow the requirements of the Clean Air Act, the peer-reviewed science, and the federal Clean Air Science Advisory Committee (CASAC), and set a strong standard as soon as possible.

For forty years, the Clean Air Act has saved lives and prevented illness, all while our nation's economy grew. A cornerstone of this important law is the authority of the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set health-based National Ambient Air Quality Standards. Other Clean Air Act programs then strive to achieve pollution reductions that will ensure attainment of these air quality standards, and therefore the protection of human health.

Ozone, the primary component of smog, is the nation's most pervasive air pollutant. Millions of people live in areas where health effects of high ozone levels can be felt. Ozone can cause chest pain and coughing, aggravate asthma, reduce lung function, and cause premature death. Ozone is particularly dangerous for sensitive populations such as children, the elderly, and people with asthma and other respiratory illnesses. No wonder, then, that efforts to protect the public from this pollution are popular – a recent poll conducted by the American Lung Association found that 75% of voters across the political spectrum said they favor EPA setting stricter standards on smog. There is also strong support for the Clean Air Act in the United States Senate – we are among the 34 Senators who have sponsored S. Res. 119, calling for continued implementation of the Clean Air Act to reduce smog-forming and other pollutants.

The Clean Air Act requires EPA to revisit air quality standards every five years. Yet we continue to set policy based on a standard set nearly fifteen years ago. The 1997 standard, at 80 parts per billion (ppb), is higher than science has established is safe for human beings to breathe.

In 2007, the federal Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) evaluated the evidence from 1,700 peer-reviewed studies of the health impacts of ozone. Based on this evaluation, the CASAC unanimously recommended an ozone air quality standard of 60 – 70 ppb. The previous administration ignored that recommendation, setting the standard at an arbitrary 75 ppb.

In 2009, the EPA stayed and agreed to reconsider the 75 ppb standard. Earlier this year, CASAC reaffirmed unanimously that the evidence strongly supports an ozone standard of 60 – 70 ppb.

We already follow the peer-reviewed science in public health alerts that limit what people can do on high ozone days. Our states issue “moderate” ozone warnings once the ozone concentration reaches 60 ppb. During “moderate” alerts, our public health officials advise people with respiratory diseases such as asthma to limit outdoor exercise and strenuous activities. Once ozone concentrations exceed 75 ppb, public health officials advise everyone to avoid strenuous activity late in the afternoon and evening, and warn children, the elderly, and people with respiratory diseases to stay inside all day. At those levels, for example, the Rhode Island state transit authority provides free bus transportation throughout the state.

It is time for our legal framework for addressing pollution to catch up with the science of ozone hazards, and the reality of illness and reduced productivity that so many of our constituents face on bad ozone days. EPA and the states must implement strategies that will reduce ozone at the source, rather than manage pollution by warning people about bad air days. Opponents talk about the costs of controlling pollution, but there are significant economic and human costs of premature death, missed days of work and school for respiratory ailments, and reduced productive capacity of the chronically ill. Meanwhile, EPA has estimated that setting an ozone air quality standard of 60 – 70 ppb would result in health and economic benefits of \$13 billion to \$100 billion (in 2006 dollars) in 2020, and save 1,500 to 12,000 lives.

Moreover, nearly every Clean Air Act policy that would be triggered or adjusted based on a new, health-protective ozone air quality standard would consider cost, ensuring that as we clean up air

pollution we do so in a cost-effective way.

We are disturbed by media reports that a number of industry groups are urging the Administration to set a weak ozone standard, or to avoid setting a new standard at all. In so arguing, polluters are ignoring 40 years of data demonstrating that clean air investments are good for public health and the economy. In fact, gross domestic product has increased 210 percent since the Clean Air Act was passed in 1970, while at the same time we have reduced air pollution by more than 60 percent. Further, the Clean Air Act has created jobs, spurred a multi-billion dollar trade surplus in environmental technology for American businesses, and provided enormous public health benefits relative to investment in pollution control technology.

The Clean Air Act is clear that this ozone standard must be set to protect public health. We urge the Administration to stand strong against efforts to weaken the Clean Air Act, to follow the health science, and to protect public health, by strengthening the ozone standard to a level recommended by the CASAC.

Sincerely:

Sheldon Whitehouse
Richard Blumenthal
Ben Cardin
Kristen Gillibrand
John Kerry
Frank Lautenberg
Patrick Leahy
Joe Lieberman
Bernie Sanders

