Ellison: Regulate Boilers to Save Lives, Create Jobs

- By Rep. Keith Ellison
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Right when it looked like the Environmental Protection Agency would score a touchdown by curbing air pollution, it settled for a punt.

Last year, the EPA was on track to complete regulations on the toxic air pollution caused by industrial boilers. But in mid-December, the agency decided it needed an extra 15 months to issue the regulations instead of meeting a court-scheduled deadline of Jan. 16, 2011.

People who need clean air to breathe (which is everyone!) should immediately urge the EPA to regulate these polluters as planned. Industrial boilers provide heat and electricity to chemical plants and oil refineries, but they also produce harmful pollution. Industrial boilers are the second-largest source of mercury emissions nationwide. They also produce emissions of lead and acid gases — as well as benzene and dioxins, which are both known carcinogens.

The EPA's proposed regulation — which is widely known as the boiler MACT, for Maximum Achievable Control Technology — will lead to reduced pollution from industrial boilers. This will give affected communities much-needed relief from disproportionately high rates of asthma, heart disease, birth defects and cancer caused by the pollution. In particular, reduced emissions of mercury will limit the dangerous impact mercury pollution can have on fetal health and on a child's ability to think and learn.

Communities across the country can't wait another 15 months, because the boiler MACT rule is literally a life saver. The EPA's data show that reducing the particulate matter pollution from industrial boilers alone will save the lives of nearly 5,000 people and generate net economic benefits of $14 billion to $38 billion every year. The benefits outweigh the projected costs of compliance by as much as 13-to-1.

In an attempt to kill this regulation, industry groups have raised a red herring that it will reduce jobs and hurt the economy. For example, the Council of Industrial Boiler Owners commissioned a report claiming the boiler MACT will put more than 300,000 jobs "at risk."

I am sensitive to job loss concerns, especially in our present economy, but this estimate is misleading. The National Association of Clean Air Agencies, which represents state authorities dealing with air pollution, concluded that the CIBO-commissioned report is based on exaggerations and omissions. The NACAA found that the industry report substantially overestimated the boiler MACT's costs and completely ignored the rule's many benefits, including the tens of thousands of new jobs that would be created to install, operate and maintain pollution-control equipment.

Inaccurate and misleading industry concerns should not stand in the way of using readily available technology to improve air quality. Some states — including Minnesota — give tax breaks for companies upgrading to more efficient boiler equipment, but these incentives can't solve our national air pollution problem. It's clear that we need uniform standards to reduce toxic air pollution across the

country. For affected communities, which are all too frequently low-income and minority populations, the regulatory delay is putting American lives at risk.

To date, reducing air pollution has certainly been a great deal for our country. In its most recent report to Congress, the Office of Management and Budget noted that the benefits of EPA actions to reduce air pollution from October 1999 to 2009 have far outweighed the costs. These benefits include fewer children rushed to the emergency room because of an asthma attack, reduced exposure to cancer-causing agents, and fewer babies born with harmful defects.

Instead of taking an additional 15 months, a court has ordered EPA to issue this regulation by Feb. 21. This is the right decision. Distorted claims by industry groups should not prevent the EPA from ensuring that future generations have clean air to breathe.

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