Lawsuit Challenges Air Pollution Standards as Weak, Outdated

Local News

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Risks to human health and the environment are the reasons cited for a lawsuit to force the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to update its National Ambient Air Quality Standards.

At least 120,000 people a year die from health complications related to breathing dirty air, according to the agency's figures. The suit, filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, is brought by the American Lung Association and the National Parks Conservation Association, represented by Earthjustice.

Mark Wenzler, NPCA's vice president for climate and air quality programs, says park employees in the Northwest and elsewhere also cope with polluted haze that makes travel hazardous and affects wildlife as well as people.

National parks suffer from some of the worst air pollution in the country. Not only does it make the air dangerous for visitors who come to these parks to expect clean air and healthy experiences, it also really harms the wildlife and the plants. - Mark Wenzler
The EPA itself already is a hot-button topic in this election year, says Earthjustice attorney Paul Cort. He thinks the agency is dragging its feet to avoid prompting any new controversy.

"That's my sense, that we're moving into campaign season and there is an interest in being very careful about starting any of these rulemakings that are going to draw a lot of reaction."

This type of air pollution comes from a number of sources, including heavy industry, diesel trucks and other vehicles. Just this week, Cort says, a study in the Archives of Internal Medicine found a "strong association" between exposure to fine-particle pollution and strokes.

"These are very tiny particles that are able not only to get deep down into the lungs but then to actually penetrate through the lungs into the bloodstream, where they cause all kinds of other health impacts."

The EPA issued its last National Ambient Air Quality rules in 2006, but a court found them to be inadequate in 2009. The lawsuit asks that the EPA complete its review and suggest updates by this October.

More information is online at earthjustice.org/soot.