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BUSH BASHES ENVIRONMENT RULES DURING LAST DAYS

(11/11/2008)

In the next few weeks, the Bush administration is expected to relax environmental-protection rules on power plants near national parks and uranium mining near the Grand Canyon.

Bush is expected to further change the rules to expand the role of mountaintop-removal coal mining in Appalachia.

The Bush administration is expected to try to get some of the rules into final form by the week before Thanksgiving.

The regulations have already had periods of public comment, and no further comments are being taken.

The Bush administration's changes are in keeping with President Bush's overall support of deregulation.

CHANGES IN MOUNTAINTOP MINING LIKELY

The Department of Interior would change rules on dumping the earth removed for mining into nearby streams.

The current rule, dating from the Reagan administration, says that no surface mining may occur within 100 feet of a stream unless there'd be no harm to water quality or quantity.

The rule change essentially would eliminate the buffer by allowing the government to grant waivers so that mining companies can dump the rubble from mountaintops into valleys, thus burying streams.

The new rule would let companies explain why they can't avoid dumping into streams and how they intend to minimize harm.

A September report on the proposal by the department's Office of Surface Mining said that environmental concerns would be taken into account "to the extent possible, using the best technology currently available."



The government and mining companies have been ignoring the buffer anyway since the 1990s, said Joan Mulhern, an attorney with Earthjustice.

LOWERING POLLUTION STANDARDS

Two rule changes would apply to electric power plants and other stationary sources of air pollution.

The first mainly concerns older power plants.

Under the Clean Air Act, plants that are updated must install pollution-control technology if they'll produce more emissions. The rule change would allow plants to measure emissions on an hourly basis, rather than their total yearly output.

This way, plants could run for more hours and increase overall emissions without exceeding the threshold that would require additional pollution controls.

The other change would make it easier for companies to build polluting facilities near national parks and wilderness areas.

A proposed rule change would allow federal agencies to decide for themselves whether timber sales, new dams or other projects harm wildlife protected under the act.

That means they'd no longer have to consult the agencies that are charged with administering the Endangered Species Act, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Among other rule changes and plans that might become final are commercial oil-shale leasing, a new rule that would allow loaded, concealed weapons in some national parks, and oil and gas leasing on wild public lands in West Virginia and Utah.

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