

Maryland's Dirty Air

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A LARGE PORTION of the blame for Maryland's poor air quality lies with coal-fired power plants, which spew pollutants into the air that are harmful both to the environment and to people -- the young, the old and the infirm, especially. A recent Harvard University study said the state's six largest coal-burning plants contribute to 700 deaths each year. At one plant alone, Chalk Point in Prince George's County, some 70,000 people who live within a 30-mile radius are at particular risk; emissions from the plant are believed responsible for the premature deaths of about 130 people each year.

As recently as a year ago, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) backed the energy industry in opposing legislative and state regulatory efforts in Maryland to reduce dirty emissions. But the governor, facing uncertain prospects for reelection this year, reversed course in December, throwing his weight behind a regulatory Clean Power Rule. Though Mr. Ehrlich subsequently backpedaled a little under pressure from the power industry, relaxing standards that power plants would have to meet, his proposal still represents a step toward reducing emissions that cause smog, respiratory problems and acid rain. We applaud the governor for finally getting on the right side of the issue. [Green Delaware doesn't agree with the backpedaling. /AJM]

Unfortunately, Mr. Ehrlich would stop there, without addressing the more daunting, long-term problem of carbon dioxide, which scientists believe is a major cause of global warming and rising sea levels. Legislation pending in the state's General Assembly, the Healthy Air Act, goes farther than the governor's plan and would do more to promote environmental health. The bill would require plants to curtail their carbon dioxide emissions 10 percent by 2018. The cost to power plants would be no more than \$20 million, a modest price compared with what modifications to reduce other harmful pollutants would cost. It's a limited move but a necessary one -- and it is in line with what seven other Eastern states are doing.

Apart from the difference on carbon dioxide, Mr. Ehrlich's proposed regulation and the General Assembly's pending legislation are relatively close. Still, the state would be better off with a law, which would be harder to roll back in the future and probably better able to withstand a court challenge if energy producers brought one. Maryland's move toward reining in polluters may be somewhat late and somewhat modest. But after years of inaction by government and heavy spending on lobbying by power producers, it appears to signal a welcome shift in the direction of cleaner air.