

EPA Pollution Study Discounts RFS' Air Quality Benefits: Biofuels Industry

Biofuel industry officials are criticizing an "anti-backsliding" study EPA released on Friday, saying the long-delayed report fails to consider the air quality benefits provided by blending renewable fuels with conventional gasoline and diesel.

In the study, EPA concluded that "no additional measures are necessary" to mitigate the effect of renewable fuel volumes on the environment outside of the Tier 3 emissions standards finalized by the agency in 2014.

The study reviewed the Renewable Fuel Standard's (RFS) impact on air quality, while considering "different blend levels, types of renewable fuels, and available vehicle technologies, as well as appropriate national, regional, and local air quality control measures."

The report was conducted using the agency's Motor Vehicle Emission Simulator (MOVES) and the Community Multiscale Air Quality models to assess emission changes.

Geoff Cooper, president and CEO of the Renewable Fuels Association (RFA), said use of the MOVES model in the study means the results are "highly suspect and untrustworthy."

Cooper pointed to the agency's own acknowledgement within the report that the model came with "limitations and uncertainties" and would be undergoing certain updates and improvements.

"Unfortunately, EPA ignored the advice of RFA and air quality experts. Instead, they proceeded to use a model and data set with known flaws and technical shortcomings. The model's questionable predictions for certain emissions result from its use of data that misrepresents the actual parameters and composition of ethanol blends," Cooper said.

He urged EPA to use its own real-world data collected since the start of the RFS in 2005 that Cooper said shows the program has been responsible for significant reductions in carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide ozone, fine particulate matter and sulfur dioxide emissions.

Growth Energy CEO Emily Skor added that it's "disappointing to see this EPA miss another chance to correct outdated claims which minimize contributions of U.S. biofuels to clean air and a healthy climate."

And Kurt Kovarik, vice president of federal affairs for the National Biodiesel Board, said "EPA's study should put to rest calls for halting growth in the RFS volumes. If anything, the study understates the potential environmental benefits of increasing use of biodiesel and renewable diesel."

In passing the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, which expanded and extended the RFS, Congress directed EPA to complete a report every three years on the environmental effects of the program and to conduct a review of the program's impact on air quality, the anti-backsliding review.

In response to a 2016 report from EPA's inspector general, the agency agreed to issue the triennial report by Dec. 31, 2017, and the anti-backsliding report by September 2024. The triennial report, which

was not released until June 2018, found that increased use of biofuels has had a negative environmental impact.

The Sierra Club in October 2017 sued the agency over the missed deadlines for both reports and EPA committed to an earlier release of the anti-backsliding study under a settlement agreement it reached with the environmental group.

Once Friday's study is published in the Federal Register, EPA will accept public comments on the findings for 30 days.

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