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Breathing uneasily: Obama retreats on tightening smog standards

Obama's pandering to business on air pollution will cost lives

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By Rena Steinzor

2:48 p.m. EDT, September 7, 2011

In a decision that outraged public health experts and environmentalists Friday, President **Barack Obama** announced that he had directed the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** not to do anything further to lower smog in the air until 2013 — after he has been reelected (or so he hopes). EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson was about to tighten controls, which are at this moment significantly less protective even than what the Bush administration thought acceptable. But President Obama, apparently anxious to placate relentless critics at the **American Petroleum** Institute and the Chamber of Commerce, told Ms. Jackson to back off.

The business groups could hardly contain their glee, disingenuously describing the president's decision as an "enormous victory for America's job creators." Too bad, I guess, for Americans who breathe, the vast majority of whom will now be faced with the consequence of this phony choice between jobs and clean air — air that is, according to the EPA's scientific advisory panel, unsafe.

For Maryland, Mr. Obama's pander was very bad news. The air in the Baltimore/Washington corridor fails to meet the EPA's current — weaker — safety standards. As a result, Code Orange alert days, when the air is so bad that children, **asthmatics** and the elderly are warned to stay indoors, have become routine. Evaluating Maryland air quality, the **American Lung Association** gave every place an "F" except for Baltimore City and **Garrett County**, which got "C's," and **Worcester County**, which got a "D."

Harford County has had 49 Code Orange days this year, leading the state. Cecil is next with 34; Anne Arundel had 31; and **Baltimore County** had 24. (It seems paradoxical for the state's biggest city to be doing better than Harford or Anne Arundel, but the reason is the wind, which blows all the smothering gases from I-95 traffic, power plants and chemical plants into the suburbs.)

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About 1.3 million Marylanders suffer from **cardiovascular disease**, and 140,000 of our children have asthma. For many of them, unrelenting smog could become debilitating. That's if they're lucky. If they're not, it could become an early death sentence. According to the EPA's analysis, stronger smog standards could have saved 4,300 lives nationally and avoided as many as 2,200 **heart attacks** a year.

President Obama's retreat is particularly craven because EPA Administrator Jackson had made a deal with environmental organizations in 2009 to immediately reconsider the Bush administration's ozone standard. The groups had brought lawsuits against the EPA because the Bush-proposed standard was so much weaker than the one a blue ribbon panel of scientific experts said was necessary to fulfill the Clean Air Act's mandate to protect public health. The deal Ms. Jackson struck with the organizations required action by August 2010, but the EPA missed the deadline repeatedly. Now, we must live with a 1997 standard much weaker even than what the Bush administration proposed, at least until 2013.

After taking the unusual step of issuing a statement personally derailing the EPA's efforts, Mr. Obama sent **White House** regulatory czar Cass Sunstein out to give Ms. Jackson her humiliating marching orders. The logic of these orders suggests he has been making visits down the Rabbit Hole with Alice: The 1997 standard cannot be changed because in 2013, the EPA might decide to change it again. Better to have only one decision made, and a let a few more thousand people die in the meantime. They're anonymous deaths, after all.

The science here is squarely against the president. But what makes the decision doubly mystifying is that the politics are lousy as well. Business groups and **Republicans** in Congress won't lay off Mr. Obama now that they've won this one; they'll just move on to a different regulatory fight. And it's hard to imagine a groundswell of campaign contributions from polluting industries to the Obama reelection effort.

Perhaps President Obama is assuming that voters who have children with asthma or **heart conditions** will

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conclude they have no better choice than him. That may well be true. But it takes more than traditional **Democrats** listlessly pulling levers to win these days, as the president should remember from the last time around, when he pledged to be a transformative — not a business-as-usual — leader.

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