

Critics spot emissions plan loophole

By GEORGE MATHEWSON
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A government plan to cut industrial pollution in Ontario contains a loophole that could actually allow the petroleum industry to increase emissions of smog-causing chemicals.

The industry emissions reduction plan sets new limits for six industrial sectors that produce two key smog ingredients—nitrogen oxide and sulphur dioxide—and increasingly tightens those caps by 2015.

The regulations, expected to take effect this year, would have a major impact on four Sarnia-area oil refineries.

Imperial Oil, Shell Canada, Suncor and Nova would all need to reduce emissions, in some cases by up to 60 per cent. But critics say the draft assigns relatively small cuts to

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the petroleum sector as a whole. And because companies could buy and sell emission reduction credits with other Ontario and U.S. companies, air pollution sector-wide could increase.

"Emissions trading is not a bad idea, but there are a lot of loopholes in this particular plan," said Therese Hutchinson, a research co-ordinator at the Occupation Health Clinic for Ontario Workers located in Point Edward.

"You can buy your way out of your responsibility in your local airshed. There's a question if that's responsible."

In a letter this month to Environment Minister Leona Dombrowsky, a coalition of health and environmental

groups rejected the plan as flawed.

"(We) cannot support this proposal without significant emission reduction improvements and the removal of the emissions trading loopholes," said the group, which includes the Ontario Medical Association and Sierra Legal Defence Fund.

The plan completed a second round of public consultations this month and the ministry expected to implement it by the end of the year.

As it stands, the projected nitrogen oxide emissions from oil refineries would be reduced four per cent over the next decade.

But if companies took full advantage of credit trading provisions, emissions could increase 48 per cent next year and still be 28 per cent higher

by 2015.

Eric Loi, a senior policy co-ordinator with the Ontario Environment Ministry, acknowledged the credits could be used that way.

"You can buy your way out of your responsibility in your local airshed."

Therese Hutchinson

But any increases within the sector would have to be offset by improvements at other industrial facilities, resulting in cleaner air overall, he said.

"It's possible. But that also means that somewhere else somebody has to reduce emissions, so overall there's a net reduction to the airshed."

Local refinery officials say they will meet reduction targets through process improvements.

The Shell refinery, for example, intends to cut sulphur emissions in half by 2010, said spokesperson Denita Davis.

"We're confident we're on track."

Co-generation and other process changes will allow Imperial Oil to meet a combined 50 per cent reduction in sulphur at Sarnia and Nanticoke, spokesperson Janet Maaten said.

Other industrial sectors covered by the Ontario plan include iron and steel, cement, pulp and paper, glass and carbon black.

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