Cleaning the air

New air quality rules would build on the state's pollution limits

By Kenneth Kimmell

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FOR YEARS, the Northeast has been called the "tailpipe of the United States'' - a place where air pollutants from across the country foul our skies and lungs. That negative moniker is due to no fault of our own, but is a casualty of our location downwind of pollution sources in other regions.

Under Governor Deval Patrick, Massachusetts has led the nation in reducing pollution from power plants, cars and trucks, industrial sources and consumer products. For example, strict mercury limits for coal plants went into effect in 2008, and the plants have reported dramatic reductions in mercury emissions.

Yet, despite these efforts, the Commonwealth still has too many days each year of unhealthy air. This is largely due to the pollutants that are produced by power plants in upwind states in the Midwest and Southeast, and carried by prevailing winds into our backyards. Pollution from cars and trucks also continues to be a significant factor.

Fortunately, new rules from the US Environmental Protection Agency would require upwind power plants to cut pollution the way we have done here, which will level the playing field and ensure that Massachusetts reaps the benefits of its clean air rules. The EPA is also expected to propose rules to cut pollution from cars and light trucks through tighter vehicle standards and cleaner gasoline. These rules deserve our support.

The EPA's Cross-State Air Pollution Rule, finalized in July, requires power plants to reduce emissions that cause ozone and fine particulates that can be drawn deep into one's lungs. This will cut down on the number of days that we need to warn our residents that our air is unhealthy, something that happened 10 times last summer.

The EPA estimates that nationwide, up to $280 billion in health benefits will result from the new rule, due to 34,000 fewer premature deaths each year, 15,000 fewer non-fatal heart attacks, thousands of fewer hospitalizations, and 400,000 fewer cases of aggravated asthma throughout the eastern, central, and southern United States.

In addition, the EPA is expected to soon finalize a rule to reduce toxic emissions from large power plants - the Mercury and Air Toxics Rule. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin, particularly to the developing brain of the fetus and young child. Even small amounts of mercury are harmful.

Extensive scientific research shows widespread mercury pollution across New England, largely due to air deposition of mercury from upwind states. Because of high mercury levels, all New England states warn against eating certain types of locally caught fish.

Massachusetts has been leading national and international efforts to reduce mercury pollution since the 1990s. It has achieved a 91-percent reduction in toxic mercury releases by focusing on sources such as coal-fired electric generating plants. But we can't do it alone. Other states need to do their part, which is what the new the EPA rule will require.

To complement these efforts on stationary sources, the EPA's forthcoming "Tier 3'' vehicle standards will require cleaner cars and light trucks, likely beginning with model year 2017. EPA also plans to reduce the sulfur content of gasoline, which alone would dramatically reduce smog-forming emissions at a cost of less than a penny per gallon.

Despite the many benefits of these rules, the EPA is under attack for proposing them, with some claiming that environmental protection kills jobs. Just the opposite is our experience in Massachusetts. As we imposed some of the strictest controls in the nation, our economy performed far better than the national average. In addition, companies such as Thermo Fisher Scientific in Franklin, which has 365 employees and manufactures air quality monitoring devices, are prospering by manufacturing the equipment that businesses will need to comply with these new rules.

The Massachusetts experience shows that health-protective emission limits are feasible, and foster innovation and job growth. But despite our best efforts, we still live with pollution crossing our borders daily from upwind sources. It's time for other states to take similar steps to address pollution they export, and the EPA's new rules will make this happen.

Kenneth Kimmell is commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.