E.P.A. Recommends Tougher Smog Standards, Citing Public Health Concerns

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WASHINGTON, June 21 (AP) — Pollution standards are too weak to protect people from the air they breathe, the E.P.A. administrator said Thursday, recommending tougher limits on the smog across the country.

Still, under pressure from big business, the administrator, Stephen L. Johnson, left the door open to keeping the rules as they are.

It is the Environmental Protection Agency’s first new recommendation since 1997 for ground-level ozone, the principal component of smog, that noxious combination of car exhaust, industrial emissions and gasoline vapors aggravated by summertime sun and heat.

Mr. Johnson recommended reducing current smog standards by 11 percent to 17 percent. Among other benefits, the agency estimated this could reduce by 30 percent to 60 percent the risk of children’s having trouble breathing normally.

“Based upon the current science, I have concluded that the current standard is insufficient to protect public health,” Mr. Johnson said, noting that ozone can harm the lungs and aggravate asthma.

Studies have linked increased ozone levels with higher hospital admissions. The agency will release an impact analysis of its proposal in a few weeks that will detail health benefits and economic costs.

The E.P.A. measures smog by calculating the concentration of ozone molecules in the atmosphere over an eight-hour period. The current standard is 0.084 parts per million, which the agency proposes reducing to 0.070 to 0.075 parts per million.

The agency will take public comment for 90 days and settle on a final number by March 12, 2008. But it is also soliciting comments on alternate standards, including keeping the current one or going down to 0.060 parts per million.

Environmentalists criticized the E.P.A.’s decision to consider keeping the current standard, noting that the agency’s Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee has said the standard should be no higher than 0.070 parts per million.

“The science overwhelmingly supports closing the door on the current standard once and for all,” said Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California and chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. “Instead of listening to science, the administrator seems to be intent on listening to the wish lists of polluting industries.”
Business and industry groups, including the National Association of Manufacturers, have been lobbying for the smog standard to stay the same, contending that lowering it would be costly and unnecessary. Although the E.P.A. says ozone levels have dropped 21 percent nationwide since 1980, states are still working to meet the smog levels set in 1997 because doing so takes years.