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Carbon Emissions Hearing On Tap

By NOLAN STOUT Daily News-Record 10 hrs ago

HARRISONBURG — Although the General Assembly rejected Gov. Ralph Northam's efforts to join a nine-state effort to cut carbon emissions from power plants, the Democratic governor is seeking regulatory reforms to mimic the program on his own.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality will hold a hearing in Harrisonburg next week on proposed regulations aligning the state with the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

The initiative is a market-based effort to curb emissions. Under the cap-and-trade program, power plants buy pollution credits at regional auctions to meet emissions requirements.

Over time, states reduce the number of credits, making them more expensive and encouraging companies to reduce pollution.

The states receive proceeds from the credit auctions, held several times a year, and put those funds toward energy efficiency programs or economic development initiatives. An auction in December generated \$55.8 million, according to a press release from the initiative.

The initiative, which started in 2009, includes Maine, New York, Delaware, Maryland, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Virginia's reform process began last year when former Gov. Terry McAuliffe directed DEQ to draft regulations putting the commonwealth in line with the states in the initiative.

The General Assembly must formally authorize joining the initiative. Northam made membership a priority for this legislative session, but several bills providing that power were killed in the Republican-led assembly.

A bill prohibiting the state from joining the initiative, however, narrowly passed both chambers along party lines. Northam will likely veto the legislation, which also bars DEQ from enacting any cap-and-trade program.

Under the proposed regulations, facilities would be monitored on their emissions over three-year periods, giving businesses more time to reduce pollution.

“There’s no intent here to play ‘gotcha,’” said Michael Down, DEQ’s air division director. “We want sources to be able to comply.”

Karen Sabasteanski, DEQ environmental program planner, said Virginia regulators are working on particulars for the program, which would start in 2020. One of the key questions for the hearing is whether the state should start its carbon cap at 33 million or 34 million tons per year.

“It’s a well-demonstrated way of driving down emissions, but it gives the facilities the flexibility to do that in the way that works best for them,” Sabasteanski said.

DEQ will hold the hearing at its Harrisonburg office, 4411 Early Road, on March 14 from 5 to 8 p.m. Hearings have been held throughout the state and are also scheduled in Woodbridge and Richmond.

Once the hearings wrap up, Sabasteanski said, the state will accept written comments through April 9. Staff will create a final proposal to present to the Air Pollution Control Board in the summer.



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