

Relaxing Clean Air Rules Means...

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When President Bush proposed several steps last week meant to curb the rise in energy prices, his decision to suspend purchases for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve got the most attention. But he also said he would ask the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to use its "available authority to grant waivers that would relieve critical fuel supply shortages."

What would that mean?

John Millett, an E.P.A. spokesman, said the president was referring to an existing program under which states can apply to the agency to suspend temporarily regulations requiring the sale of cleaner-burning gasoline under "extreme and unusual fuel supply circumstances."

Under the Clean Air Act, urban areas with the worst smog must sell only cleaner-burning fuel, at least during certain times of the year. Currently, the most affected areas are in California and along the East Coast between Washington and Boston.

The fuel, generally known as reformulated gasoline, has additives that allow for more complete combustion, leading to less ozone and other pollution. But those additives make gasoline more complicated to produce, and more costly.

Allowing the sale of a dirtier-burning blend, in place of a cleaner-burning one, might alleviate a supply bottleneck that is contributing to high prices. Such a substitution would give the industry time to make cleaner fuel, Mr. Millett said.

Waivers are reviewed case by case, Mr. Millett said, and are issued for 20 days, although extensions can be granted. Increased pollution is a concern, he said. "That's why we have the overall approach of minimizing duration and geographic area." Even last year, when regionwide waivers were issued after Hurricane Katrina, the agency did not see much environmental impact, he said.

But Richard Kassel, a senior lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said that allowing more pollution would not lead to relief from high gasoline prices.

"It's not clear that there's a problem with supply," he said. "There is an ozone cost to these waivers. They should be granted sparingly — when there really is a shortage, not a political problem."