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New rules will be a nice trim on pollution from mowers

Today's Topic: EPA tries to mow emissions

Our View

Recent new rules announced by the Environmental Protection Agency to curb emissions from small engines, such as those on lawn mowers, is the sort of step Americans need to see.

As awareness has grown about emissions in general and what pollution is doing to the environment, the big issue of small engines has become a compelling example of the kind of problem the nation must address. The degree of pollution those engines cause, small though the engines are, continues to be eye-opening.

The EPA early this month announced new regulations that will require reductions of 35 percent in emissions from gas-powered lawn equipment less than 25 horsepower. That requirement will go into effect in 2011. It does not pertain to engines already in use. Gas-powered recreational boats will have to have emissions reduced by 70 percent in 2010.

According to the EPA, the new restrictions will result in the reduction of hundreds of thousands of tons of hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxide. The EPA also says the new rules will save 190 million gallons of gas each year. At first glance, those numbers seem surprising, but the nature of the engines and the enormous number of small engines in use throughout the country help drive home the need to address problems caused by mowers and other lawn equipment.

Consider some of the measures of the impact of gas-powered mowers. The EPA says lawn mowers create 5 percent of the air pollution in this country. One mower in one hour creates the same amount of pollution that eight new cars moving 55 mph would create, according to one group, the Union of Concerned Scientists. Another group, at Eartheasy.com, says those string-like gas-powered trimmers used on lawns create 21 times more emissions than a typical car.

The longstanding means of mowing lawns need changes.

Findings about the effects of lawn and garden equipment and the reductions being required by the EPA have prompted complaints about costs. But as with many environmental issues, the subject cannot be looked upon only for its financial impact. Cost is a factor, but often a case is made against an environmental move as though no one had considered the price. The nation must consider the environmental cost of not acting. In the matter of gas-powered lawn equipment, the estimate is that new regulations means the price of mowers will increase about 18 percent. Similar percentages are given for price increases for boats. Familiar lines of complaint are that the changes will force manufacturers to increase their prices and that it will fall eventually to consumers. That's usually the tactic utilized to drum up opposition to a new regulation.

The EPA guidelines on small engines are an encouraging sign. Regulators should continue along that path. Ultimately, the approach on lawn and garden equipment, boat engines and similar gas-powered devices should follow the same line of action that is emerging with automobiles. There should be a search for alternative fuels, and there should be a dramatic push toward engines that function on other power sources like electricity, which is not a new concept for lawn mowers anyway. The principles of saving the environment apply across the board, and the motivation to find efficient, affordable alternatives should not wane.
