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Air Resources Board

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June 21, 2006

Ms. Lydia Wegman
C504-02
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards
Health and Environmental Impacts Division
Research Triangle Park, North Carolina 27711

Dear Ms. Wegman:

This letter is to transmit our comments on proposed changes to the process for reviewing National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). While it is clear the current process could be improved, we are concerned that some of the proposed changes will reduce the quality of the scientific review, reduce public input, and increase the influence of political considerations in the process.

Role of CASAC. Due primarily to court ordered deadlines, criteria documents and staff papers have been released that were not complete, properly edited and formatted, or adequately thought out. These incomplete documents focused the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) towards directing the scope and scientific integration of the material in subsequent drafts, rather than completing their charge of evaluating whether or not the documents presented a clear, fair and balanced picture of the available science and its interpretation. We recommend that U.S. EPA staff have sufficient time to produce and submit to CASAC high quality, complete documents, thus obviating the need for more than two drafts of any report. To accomplish this, we further recommend that the U.S. EPA either start the review process earlier or assign additional staff to assist in the review.

The historical practice of CASAC reaching closure in its review of documents should be continued. This step is necessary to preserve the value of these documents in informing policy decisions on air quality standards. If the documents do not fairly and objectively present the available science, including its limitations and uncertainties, it will be difficult to select appropriate and scientifically defensible ambient air quality standards.

Process of considering new scientific studies. We agree that the criteria documents could be streamlined but there is no need to reassess all the literature each time. New literature should be evaluated in light of prior conclusions. The most effective way to restructure criteria documents would be to begin with a summary of findings and implications from the previous review, incorporating that literature by reference. Then, the substance of the criteria document would be a review of new literature since the last criteria document, including a discussion of whether it changes any findings or interpretation from older literature. This approach would also foster the goal of a strong integrative summary of the literature by focusing on overall findings and conclusions.

Replacement of the Staff Paper with a policy assessment document. We agree the staff paper could be improved. However, moving directly from the science review to an advance notice of proposed rulemaking will weaken the process by reducing public comment, CASAC scientific review, and U.S. EPA staff input. It is essential that U.S. EPA staff scientists be able to present their assessment of options compatible with the science, requirements of the Clean Air Act, and adequate public health protection. Going directly from the science assessment to policy decisions by non-scientific administrators could lead to less health protective standards.

In conclusion, ARB appreciates the opportunity to comment on proposed changes to the NAAQS review process. We support the general concept of streamlining the process and making it timelier. However, we are gravely concerned that the proposed changes, some of which appear to have already been adopted, will substantially weaken the quality and defensibility of the national ambient air quality standards. For additional information please contact Bart Croes, Chief, Research Division at (916) 323-4519 or bcroes@arb.ca.gov

Sincerely,

Catherine Witherspoon
Executive Officer

cc: Bart Croes, Chief
Research Division