

New dustup over dust

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It's good to be reminded, from time to time, just how important it truly is to have at least a few people in government who know how things actually work in the real world.

A potential regulatory change that could be a huge problem for rural America illustrates that point.

The federal government's Environmental Protection Agency has under consideration the issuance of a rule relating to coarse particulate matter and air pollution that could have a devastating effect on farmers.

The rule might change the standard for the daily amount of particle matter - in plain language, dust - that can be in the air. This issue has been under discussion for several years and has been carefully tracked by Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, who as a farmer understands the difficulties uninformed regulatory action might cause.

Grassley has joined with 19 other senators in writing to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson expressing concern that a recent draft policy assessment could open the door to more stringent rules regarding dust. This bipartisan group has called upon Jackson to ensure that reason prevails.

"Considering the EPA's history on agriculture issues, I'm greatly concerned that this puts us one step closer to imposing more regulations on farmers," Grassley said in a statement issued July 23. "We all want a clean and healthy environment, but it defies common sense to mandate that farmers keep dust between their fence rows when combining or that the county government keep gravel dust on the road."

The EPA is considering new regulatory action regarding dust because there are studies showing that strengthening this standard could have significant health benefits, most notably for people with heart disease and lung maladies.

Unfortunately, the science behind such action is based heavily on research in urban environments. How exactly dust in farm areas fits into the picture is a somewhat different issue and must take into account the realities of farm operations. Any resident of the Hawkeye State knows that at some times of the year significant dust is impossible to avoid on a working farm.

Grassley is committed to making certain any changes regarding dusty promulgated by the EPA include provisions that are appropriate for rural America. Wrongheaded policies in this regard could devastate the farm economy.

It is good to have career specialists in our government - such as those at the EPA - who bring their expertise to bear on the problems we face.

The potential dustup over dust reminds us, however, that having elected representatives in Washington who understand how farms actually function is also important. In leading the fight for common sense on dust regulations, Grassley is serving well not only Iowa, but all of rural America.