It is time to strengthen the nation's smog limits to improve the health of millions of people who suffer the ill effects of air pollution, dozens of environmentalists, doctors, asthmatic children and religious leaders told a panel of federal officials Monday at a daylong hearing.

It was the third and final public hearing before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency makes a decision on a long-delayed new health standard for ozone, the invisible gas in smog that harms the lungs and worsens asthma and other chronic respiratory diseases.

The EPA says the current ozone standard of 75 parts per billion is too weak to protect public health. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy has proposed a new standard in the range of 65 ppb to 70 ppb.

Californians who live in some of nation's smoggiest communities urged the EPA to adopt an even stricter standard, arguing that air pollution degrades their health and quality of life. But industry trade groups and business lobbyists said that current rules are working to reduce smog and that stricter limits would send jobs overseas where regulations are less burdensome.

The EPA arrived at its proposal after its staff and its panel of science advisors reviewed more than 1,000 studies and concluded that breathing ozone at current health standards harms the lungs, even of young, healthy adults. Ozone, formed when combustion gases from cars, trucks, power plants and factories bake in the sunlight, reduces lung function and inflames the airways, among other health effects.

Health and environmental advocates pressed for an ozone standard as low as 60 ppb, citing decades of improving air quality in California as proof that businesses can curb pollution while improving the economy.

Ann Rothschild, 71, a member of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Sacramento, said she was appalled that some children in her region can't play outside because of air pollution.

"If a standard does not protect the most vulnerable among us — the children, the elderly and those with asthma — then it's not protective enough," she said.

But industry representatives said current standards adopted under the George W. Bush administration in 2008 will continue to bring smog reductions and that stricter rules will damage the economy.
"Manufacturing growth could slow or stop," said Lindsay Stovall of the American Chemistry Council, a trade group.

The EPA estimates that the stricter rules will cost industry billions of dollars each year. But it contends that the health benefits of cleaner air, including fewer asthma attacks, emergency room visits, missed school and work days and premature deaths, outweigh those costs.

More stringent rules would be most difficult for California because it has the nation's worst smog. Despite dramatic improvements in air quality from decades of emissions-cutting regulations, state regulators estimate that one-third of Californians live where ozone pollution violates current federal standards.

Once a new standard is finalized, states will be given several years to collect air quality data, draft implementation plans and come into compliance. The EPA expects most of the country would be able to meet the new standards by 2025.

California would be given more time because its air quality challenges are so severe. The state's smoggiest areas — Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley — would have until 2037 to comply.

The South Coast air basin — which includes Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties — violated the current 75-ppb ozone standard on 94 days in 2014. The region reported a 2011-13 average of 107 ppb. The San Joaquin Valley's ozone level over the same period was 94 ppb.

If tougher smog rules are approved, the EPA would also update the nation's color-coded Air Quality Index, which health advocates say is no longer an accurate reflection of the science on whether the air is healthy to breathe.

"Under the current standard, people don't have a good idea of when they are putting their health at risk simply by going for an afternoon jog or showing up for soccer practice," said Adenike Adeyeye, a research and policy analyst for the public interest law firm Earthjustice.

In 2011, President Obama, under pressure from business interests, went against recommendations of the EPA and its science advisors to scuttle a similar proposal to tighten the ozone standard before the 2012 presidential election.

The EPA is accepting public comments on its latest proposal through March 17 and is under a court-ordered deadline to issue a final decision by October.

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