

Kansas City Star -- July 3, 2006

Path now clear for cleaner mowers **Bond has backed off his opposition, so the EPA eyes new emission rules.**

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The Kansas City Star

WASHINGTON | - WASHINGTON | If pushing a lawn mower was as hard as pushing for new rules to control its toxic emissions, grass might never get cut.

But the biggest obstacle to doing anything about it — Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri — backed off his opposition last week.

“This is a watershed day for this issue,” said Frank O’Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, a nonprofit, nonpartisan environmental protection group. “With Bond saying he’s not going to oppose it, it’s a huge clean air victory.”

The Environmental Protection Agency is now poised to offer new emission standards for lawn mowers, whose small engines are really pollution-creating monsters.

Those standards also would affect weed trimmers, chain saws, leaf blowers and other equipment powered by small spark-ignited engines.

The EPA says a new push mower can produce as many hydrocarbons in one hour as 11 new cars. A new riding mower can match an hour’s worth of pollution from 34 new cars.

New EPA rules likely will stem from tough controls the agency is expected to approve this year in California. Emissions from mowers and other small-engine equipment account for 5 percent of mobile source pollution there.

In the Kansas City area, lawn mower pollution contributes nearly 8 percent of the volatile organic compounds released in the air, said James Joerke, air quality manager for the Mid-America Regional Council.

California’s new rules, which would tighten emission standards and reduce evaporative fuel vapors, are expected to cut small-engine pollution by about 35 percent. Stricter national standards could be on the books in another year or so.

Bond has twice thrown roadblocks in the path. He’s done so on behalf of Briggs & Stratton Corp., the largest domestic manufacturer of outdoor power equipment. The company has two plants in Missouri.

The company has warned of higher prices and safety risks if the industry was forced to re-tool. Manufacturers would likely have to add plastic gas tanks and impermeable lines to hold down gas evaporation, and catalytic converters to cut emissions. Automakers have had to use converters since the 1970s.

Adding converters, which are about the size of a large marble, could boost sticker prices by more than \$60, the industry predicted. The EPA said that figure should be \$8.

Bond has long argued that new regulations could threaten 1,750 jobs at the company's Rolla and Poplar Bluff plants, and 5,000 other manufacturing-related jobs in the state.

In 2003, he received \$5,500 in campaign contributions from Briggs & Stratton executives.

Bond has gotten amendments into bills to delay the California emissions rules and narrow their impact, and pushed for more studies. One was a review of the fire risk from catalytic converters, but the EPA found few problems.

Bond had hinted that he might try to use the EPA's annual spending bill to hold up the new rules when the Senate Appropriations Committee took up the agency budget. But Bond, a member of the panel, did not press the issue at the hearing Thursday.

In a news release, he said he would monitor the rule-making process "to make sure EPA implements the law in a way that ensures that safety and jobs are protected, but I do not believe further legislative action is necessary at this time."

Briggs & Stratton declined to comment. But the small-engine industry tempered its opposition to the California rules. Bill Harley, president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, said his group did not oppose new regulations but wanted to ensure their safe implementation.

"We are concerned about life and property," he said. "Certainly, you don't want to have the situation where environmental progress goes up in smoke."

The Honda Motor Co. has backed the tougher California rules. Three other manufacturers, Kawasaki, Tecumseh and Kohler, also support them.

The problem

- Americans have about 52 millions lawn mowers, which spew a cloud of chemical, smog-friendly pollutants and carbon monoxide.

- A new walk-behind mower can emit as much pollution in one hour as 11 new cars. A new riding mower can match the pollution from 34 new cars.

A solution?

- New rules propose equipping mowers with catalytic converters, which draw out the pollutants and turn them to carbon dioxide and water. This would reduce exhaust emissions by as much as 80 percent.