

Law Would Require Reducing Sulfur in Common Heating Oil

By MIREYA NAVARRO

Moving to reduce air pollution, the New York State Assembly approved legislation on Wednesday that requires a drastic cut in sulfur levels in the heating oil most commonly used by households across the state.

The bill, approved in an 87-to-24 vote, limits the sulfur content of No. 2 heating oil to no greater than 15 parts per million — down from the current range of 2,000 to 15,000 parts per million — starting in July 2012. The State Senate passed the same bill last week, and Gov. David A. Paterson, whose energy plan already advocates a switch to the ultra-low-sulfur oil, is expected to sign it into law.

A plunge in sulfur content would have important health and environmental implications for areas like New York City, where soot pollution contributes to air quality that fails to meet federal standards and causes health problems like asthma among children. The No. 2 grade of heating oil is currently used by more than 70 percent of households in both the city and the state.

When heating oil is burned, the sulfur dioxide is released, producing greenhouse gas emissions and acid rain. In New York City, many large buildings burn even dirtier grades of heating oil, known as No. 4 and No. 6. In a report last year, the Environmental Defense Fund, an environmental group, found that just 1 percent of buildings in the city created 87 percent of all soot pollution arising from heating oil by relying on these more viscous oils.

The Bloomberg administration and the City Council have been weighing means to phase out the dirtiest oils but have not come up with new laws or regulations. The state legislation should help: While it applies only to No. 2 oil, it will also lead to lower sulfur content in No. 4, which is a blend of No. 2 and No. 6.

Among the supporters of cleaner heating oil is the New York Oil Heating Association, a trade group of heating oil dealers in New York City, which notes that a less polluting product allows oil to be competitive with natural gas as a heating source on the environmental front.

“There’s no reason not to embrace this,” said Michael Woloz, a spokesman for the group.

Building owners and landlord groups have opposed the changes, seeking more time to allow refiners and distributors to meet the new demands.