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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3310

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The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Administrator Leavitt:

I am writing in support of recent recommendations sent to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Secretary William Ross regarding boundary designations for particulate matter (PM) 2.5. In light of the high loss of manufacturing jobs, preventive steps by state regulators, and improved air quality in the area, I believe a designation of "unclassifiable" for the Hickory Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is justified at the present time.

Since 2002, the Hickory PM 2.5 monitor has reported steadily declining readings for the region. It is Secretary Ross's belief that the readings for the three year period from 2002 to 2004 will show the area to be in full compliance with EPA regulations. **It is my understanding that a similar exception was afforded the Syracuse, New York MSA which had comparable circumstances in the designation of 8-hour ozone non-attainment boundaries in April, with the understanding that it would be re-designated based on 2002-2004 data early next year.**

Our area has already entered into an early action compact (EAC) for 8-hour ozone requirements and is beginning to implement North Carolina's Clean Smokestacks Act, signed into law last year. These actions prove that we are on the cutting edge of a balanced approach to meeting air quality standards. As my earlier letters have stated, it is imperative for the EPA to focus on hard scientific data when making rulings that could potentially affect economic development in areas that are already hurting from massive job losses. A flexible regulatory approach is key to preserving the environment without damaging future growth in manufacturing.

With these thoughts in mind, I urge you to follow the recommendations of Secretary Ross and designate the Hickory MSA as "unclassifiable." Thank you for your continued assistance regarding this matter. I look forward to a written response which I may share with local officials before the end of the 108th Congress.

Sincerely,


CASS BALLENGER
Member of Congress