



4. AIR POLLUTION: Ozone advisory issued in Wyo.'s Upper Green River Basin (02/28/2008)

Eryn Gable, special to *Land Letter*

Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality issued an ozone-related human health warning for the first time ever yesterday in the Upper Green River Basin, a region once renowned for its pristine air. Environmentalists are hoping the warning serves as a red light as the Bureau of Land Management moves forward with oil and gas permits for the Pinedale Anticline.

DEQ warned that children, the elderly and people with respiratory conditions should avoid strenuous or extended outdoor activities until the advisory is lifted. The advisory is expected to be in effect until Saturday, according to DEQ spokesman Keith Guille.

"We're not very used to having these types of levels," Guille said, noting that it is the first time DEQ has issued an advisory for ozone in the area.

Elevated wintertime ozone is an unusual occurrence. Typically, higher ozone levels occur in large cities like Denver and Los Angeles in the summer when there is plenty of sunlight to cause the photochemical reactions in the atmosphere that lead to ozone formation.

Ozone is formed through chemical reactions of volatile organic compounds and oxides of nitrogen in the presence of sunlight. Both of these air pollutants are emitted from natural gas drilling and production activities, and in smaller amounts by vehicle emissions. High levels of ozone can cause respiratory problems, especially in children, the elderly and people with existing respiratory conditions.

In the past week, eight-hour ozone levels at the Air Quality Division's area monitors have reached as high as 122 parts per billion. The AQD advises that the general public should avoid strenuous outdoor activity when eight-hour ozone values are above 105 parts per billion.

The division considers eight-hour values below 85 ppb safe and the current U.S. EPA standard is 80 ppb, but the federal government is considering lowering the limit to between 70 and 75 ppb. EPA's decision is due next month.

Ozone appears to be elevated in the basin when there are strong temperature inversions, low winds, snow cover and bright sunlight, and levels return to normal when any one of those conditions change, DEQ said.

DEQ first detected moderately elevated ozone levels at its Sublette County monitors in 2005 and 2006. Since elevated ozone concentrations are unexpected during the winter, DEQ began a formal study to determine the causes of these conditions in the basin.

Since natural gas development contributes to ozone-forming pollution, DEQ is considering limiting these emissions to reduce public exposure to elevated ozone levels.

'A wakeup call'

Linda Baker, director of the Upper Green River Valley Coalition, said the advisory should serve as a wakeup call for the Bureau of Land Management, which is proposing more than 21,000 additional wells in the basin, including an additional 4,400 in the Pinedale Anticline.

"It's alarming that BLM just released its Pinedale Anticline [supplemental environmental impact statement], which says an additional 4,400 wells would not cause exceedences of federal standards," Baker said. "That's nine times as many wells as we've got now."

Earlier this month, EPA's Denver office criticized a BLM study on expanded drilling in the Pinedale Anticline in part on grounds that the plan would continue to allow air quality, including ozone problems, to deteriorate. "The impacts are of sufficient magnitude that the proposed action should not proceed as proposed," wrote Robbie Roberts, the EPA's regional director ([Land Letter](#), Feb. 21).

Roberts noted that BLM has significantly underestimated the effects of oil and gas drilling in previous studies for the area, where industry has already drilled close to 700 wells. Emissions of nitrogen oxide, one of the precursors of ozone formation, was five times the threshold set by the 2000 Pinedale Anticline record of decision.

Pollution is now affecting air quality in wilderness areas of the Wind River Range and human health in local communities, environmentalists said.

"Ozone levels in the Pinedale area have reached extremely significant levels -- they're affecting human health," Bruce Pendery, an attorney with the Wyoming Outdoor Council, said in a statement. "This is no longer an unusual thing. We have to slow down oil and gas development until we get a handle on this."

While state and federal officials have known for years about rising levels of ozone and other pollutants, this is the first time authorities have issued a health warning to the Upper Green River Valley.

"It's terrible news, but issuing the advisory is a step forward," Jeremy Nichols, director of Rocky Mountain Clean Air Action, said in a statement. "They've had a lot of high ozone levels there, but this is the first time they've done anything about it."

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