



'The last place this should be'

By CHRIS MERRILL

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PINEDALE -- Some people here were alarmed following an air pollution advisory that warned people in the region about elevated, and potentially harmful, concentrations of ozone in the air.

After a boom in gas development in recent years -- and in the context of ongoing proposals for large-scale expansion of gas extraction -- many locals were wondering this week what the air is going to be like when thousands of more wells are drilled in the Upper Green River Basin.

Gas industry representatives said that Wednesday's advisory was the exception to the norm, and was the result of an unusual confluence of weather conditions arising at the same time. And clearer skies are on the horizon, regardless of the weather, because they are phasing in new, less-polluting technologies and strategies.

Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality issued the pollution alert after recording relatively high levels of ozone in Boulder, Daniel and at the Jonah natural gas field this past week and weather forecasts called for conditions conducive to the creation and trapping of more ozone in the valley.

DEQ is lifting its ozone advisory effective today because snow showers and wind were expected to move into western Wyoming Friday evening, which will likely clean the air for the next several days, according to a department spokesman.

'It's just scary'

The brilliant sunshine glimmered in pickup truck windshields and shop windows as pedestrians strolled through downtown Pinedale Thursday, avoiding puddles of melted snow, and wearing only shirt-sleeves and sweaters.

Locals here enjoyed a warmish February afternoon. The occasional wispy cloud drifted high over the valley on a day that served as a short reprieve from winter at 7,000 feet above sea level.

Dave Smith, a broadcast engineer and electronics expert who owns his own business, has

a shop on the south end of town, just off the main drag. Born and raised in Pinedale, he's witnessed the impacts of gas drilling on his once "sleepy little town," he said. And he hopes the air quality warning alarms some people, because he believes people in the area should be alarmed.

"It's interesting," Smith said. "When I grew up here we hated environmentalists. We hated tree huggers. We had no use for any environmental agency. You know, the word environmentalist was a fightin' word. If somebody walked up and introduced himself as an environmentalist, it was OK to punch him in the nose."

He also hated the concept of protected "wilderness" when he was growing up here, he said, because this area was so pristine, it was silly to think such a designation was necessary.

"I've kind of changed my mind a little about that. I still don't agree with the rabid tree huggers, you know, 'Save everything,' I don't agree with that. But right now, if it wasn't for the conservation groups and environmental groups, we would have a living hell going on here."

The air pollution is obvious to anybody from here, Smith said, because one need only to look at the sky and at the sunsets. But there are other impacts of the drilling that are not as obvious, including the benzenes and hydrocarbons that are making their way into the ground.

Instead of proceeding full speed ahead with gas development, the residents of the valley, as well as the relevant government agencies, need to take the necessary time to determine the long-term ramifications of what has already taken place, Smith said, before going headlong into further development.

"It's just scary, because when you think of the impacts that we've already seen, that are tangible that we have historical data on right now, (they're) for roughly 1,200 or 1,300 wells," Smith said. "This is the least populated county, with the highest mean altitude -- this is the last place this should be."

Ann Stowe, an employee of the Sublette County Library just around the corner from Smith's shop, said she has seen this kind of air pollution before. But she thought she left it in her rear-view mirror 15 years ago when she moved to Wyoming.

"I'm from Michigan, and I grew up right in the middle of the peak years of GM building in Flint and in Detroit," Stowe said. "Those are things you don't expect up here. You come here, and the water is just so clean. You'd expect this in Michigan, but not here. You just don't want to see that happen here."

Stowe said for 12 years she used to drive 20 miles back and forth from Warren Bridge every day. In the last few years of doing that drive, she said, she started to see a regular haze obscuring the mountains which was never there before.

"It's like what you've seen over in Rock Springs for years," said Margret Noble, a rancher from Cora who was returning books to the library Thursday. "It's just smog. It's just a haze. Gradually we're accepting more and more days of this air pollution."

Wake-up call?

Outside the library, Mary Lynn Worl sat on a wooden bench considering the changes she's observed here over the years. Worl grew up in Pinedale after her family moved here in 1951. She said the ozone advisory, the first ever issued by DEQ, might serve as a wake-up call for some area residents.

"I think some of the people that have been just passive or indifferent to things, hopefully now when they realize, 'Well, maybe they can't see it all the time,' but there's things out there that obviously can have immediate and long-term impacts on their health....," Worl said. "I don't think we really know what's going on out there in the gas patch. And I think we as citizens ought to know."

Mike Looney, a contractor in Daniel who owns an excavating business and mini storage business, expressed similar worries.

"I'm concerned about it," Looney said. "The economic benefit has been the big thing for the community in Sublette County, and we have a lot of revenue in the county, and we're reaping the benefits. But I just don't feel like our health standards and our quality of life should be compromised because of it. I feel like (the energy companies) are just in a big rush to get this out, it almost feels like as fast as they can."

New technology?

Industry officials say they understand the concerns of area residents about air pollution, because they share them and are working on solutions.

Randy Teeuwen, a spokesman for EnCana Oil and Gas, said his and other companies drilling in the region are working aggressively with DEQ and with the community to address air quality issues.

"I applaud the (DEQ) for their efforts to study and understand the elevated ozone levels," Teeuwen said. "And along with that, the process of monitoring is working to the degree that when we do have these seasonal events, we're aware of it, and we can continue to work on some of those issues that cause it."

Improved technology on drilling rigs in the Jonah Field will reduce the pollutants that participate in ozone creation, Teeuwen said.

"As the new technology becomes available, we're implementing it as aggressively as possible," Teeuwen said. "We've got a total of 10 natural gas drilling rigs in Jonah right

now, and all of them operate on natural gas. Those rigs have reduced NOX emissions by 90 percent compared to the traditional tier-one diesel engines that used run out there."

Jim Sewell, the staff environmental engineer for Shell Exploration and Production Co., said a proposal currently under consideration will require an 80 percent reduction in emissions of oxides of nitrogen, one of the primary pollutants that can become ozone.

And both companies say they are implementing new strategies to become more efficient and reduce emissions overall.

"Other things like the liquids gathering system reduce your truck traffic, reduce emissions from your trucks and also reduce your emissions from production facilities," Sewell said. "So the proposal goes a long way to reduce the emissions that are precursors for the formation of ozone."

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