



## **BLM, industry should heed pollution warnings**

Star-Tribune Editorial Board

Two significant signs of air pollution in southwest Wyoming are a call to action for the Bureau of Land Management and the energy industry.

The Environmental Protection Agency's regional administrator, Robert E. Roberts, notified the BLM on Feb. 14 that a plan to allow nearly 4,400 new natural gas wells on the Pinedale Anticline needs to be revised. He cited increased ozone levels in recent years due to drilling activity, as well as other air quality concerns and groundwater contamination, as the reasons the EPA lowered its rating of the plan to "environmentally unsatisfactory."

Last week, the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality issued an unprecedented air pollution advisory for the Pinedale area due to high ozone levels. In 1995, tests indicated that the area had some of the cleanest air in the country. Now, the sparsely populated area is the subject of warnings typically associated with smog-ridden metropolitan areas.

Ozone is the prime ingredient of smog. It's a colorless, highly reactive gas capable of damaging living cells, such as those present in the lining of human lungs.

DEQ's Air Quality Division advised people who might be sensitive to ozone -- including children, the elderly and those with respiratory conditions -- to avoid any strenuous, extended outdoor activity in the Pinedale area.

The EPA says ozone also damages the foliage of trees and other plants, and reduces the quality of habitat for wildlife. The Pinedale area is home to antelope, mule deer and sage grouse.

Ground-level ozone is normally a problem in the summer, but sunlight hitting a nearly complete snow cover last week combined with a strong temperature inversion to trap the ozone over the valley. The DEQ lifted its air pollution advisory Saturday, but area residents should not have their health jeopardized for even a short period of time.

The EPA's and DEQ's actions are acute warnings that future problems in the Pinedale Anticline could get a lot worse unless BLM and industry decide on an acceptable way to

mitigate the pollution.

David Finley, the DEQ's air quality administrator, linked pollutants to natural gas production activities in the area. The EPA's Roberts noted that under the BLM's preferred alternative for the Pinedale Anticline, natural gas production is expected to continue until 2065.

The EPA is currently reviewing the national primary and secondary standards for ozone, which are expected to be completed later this month. Roberts warned the BLM that the pollution problems are of "sufficient magnitude" that the proposed drilling plan should not proceed as proposed. He said a revised environmental impact statement should be completed and made available for public comment.

It will be up to the EPA's Washington, D.C., office to make certain such a review takes place. But it would be in the BLM's and gas industry's best interests to take these environmental warnings from agencies seriously and get busy working on pollution solutions. Wyoming citizens should be as concerned as state and federal regulators and demand that the ozone in the Pinedale air is reduced year-round to a safe level.