

Pinedale Roundup

Newspaper of the Upper Green River Valley

Ozone level limit lower

By Alecia Warren

Published: March 20th, 2008, Pinedale Roundup, Page 1

After Sublette County experienced its highest ozone levels ever in the past few weeks, it now carries a whole new burden on improving air quality standards.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lowered the national ozone level limit from 80 parts per billion (ppb) to 75 ppb on March 12.

Part of the agency's five-year review of the National Ambient Air Quality Standard, as required by the Clean Air Act, the new level reflects nearly 1,700 health studies across the country revealing that the former ozone standard didn't protect the public from respiratory problems.

Children, the elderly and those with chronic respiratory problems are particularly at risk to ozone's irritant qualities, and shortterm exposure can lead to wheezing, coughing or shortness of breath.

"Certainly there was a recommendation from our scientific advisory group (for a standard) that was much lower than the new standard ended up being," said Callie Videtich, director of the EPA Air and Radiation Program. Some experts insisted that the level should be lowered to at least 70 ppb to be affective. "But after careful consideration of strong, compelling science, the EPA Administrator chose to abandon the current standard and set a new one that he believes to be protective of human health."

The new standard is an inconvenient development for Sublette County, where eight hour ozone level averages rocketed above 100 ppb in February and March this year, and above 80 ppb in the winters of '05 and '06.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has studied the unprecedented winter levels since 2005, and suspects that the causes include uncommon weather conditions paired with the heavy emissions from drilling operations on the Pinedale Anticline and the Jonah Field.

The EPA currently designates 345 counties across the country in violation of the new standard.

This group doesn't include Sublette County, but only because the violation designations were based on studies from 2004-2006 . As data from the past two years is collected, many more counties will probably find they are violating the new standard as well, Videtich said.

Sublette County will very likely be included, she added.

States will have the next year to confirm their current ozone levels, which the EPA will then compare with its own research in the following year. Final

designations of violating areas will be revealed in 2010.

From there, states will have three years to develop plans to lower their emissions, and are expected to achieve ozone levels below 75 ppb by 2015, Videtich said.

If the EPA decides to lower the national ozone standard again in the meantime, states will have to meet the 75 ppb level first before starting the entire process over.

Some states, not including Wyoming, are still developing plans to lower their emissions to meet the last standard of 80 ppb.

"I think the method has proven to work," Videtich said, denying that states are trapped in constant catch-up. "It shows the EPA is trying to evaluate what the health effects are of these pollutants and getting them to a point where they stop harming public health."

The new standard must be addressed immediately by the Pinedale Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as it modifies the Revised Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (RDSEIS) for the Pinedale Anticline Project Area (PAPA), a document analyzing the potential impacts of developing an additional 4,000 wells on the anticline with year-round drilling.

The draft, released in December 2007, specifically projects that the expanded drilling project would raise daily ozone levels above 80 ppb, which the EPA deemed as "environmentally unsound" weeks before the new standard was even set.

Now the projected ozone levels are unthinkable, said EPA spokesperson Larry Svoboda, who has consulted with the BLM on writing the SEIS.

"We were concerned more about protecting class one air sheds in the past, and now it's become a public health issue," Svoboda said.

But he highly doubts that the federal government would forbid the expanded drilling project from occurring, and pointed out that there are many ways to reduce Nitrous Oxide (NOx) and volatile organic compounds (VOC), which combine to make ozone.

Methods can include tightening tail pipe emission standards, requiring cleaner technology on the gas fields, or slowing the pace of development.

Locals want to see changes on the gas field tomorrow, not in the next five years, said Linda Baker, grassroots coordinator for the conservation group the Upper Green River Valley Coalition.

"The number of drilling rigs operating at any one time should be reduced," Baker said. "I believe the industry has the capability to more widely implement class three rigs (with lower emissions), and I know they've begun to do that, but this new ozone standard really points to how much further we have to go to clean up our air and make natural gas production as clean as natural gas use."

The DEQ will develop new statewide restrictions within the next few years to enforce the standard, but Dave Finley, administrator of the Air Quality Division (AQD) of the DEQ, wasn't available to comment on what those might include.

Members of the DEQ, BLM and EPA have also organized working groups comprised of members of each agency to rework the RDSEIS so it meets national ozone standards.

The groups are meeting about twice a week, said Chuck Otto, Field Manager of the Pinedale BLM Office, though he didn't know how much progress they've made so far.

"I think most measures (for reducing ozone) we've already got in the SEIS," Otto said.

These include constructing a full-field liquid gathering system on the anticline that will replace hundreds of thousands of emission-producing trucks, as well as eliminate the need for condensate tanks that release emissions from their valves.

But air quality is a very complicated issue, Otto said, and he hopes people realize how many factors agencies have to consider in order to monitor and minimize ozone.

"One thing you see around town is a bunch of trucks with diesel engines just sitting there idling," Otto said. "We need to keep that at the backs of our minds, that we all contribute to one degree or another. (The BLM) will do what we can on the gas field, but everybody needs to be aware of the problem and take some action."

awarren@pinedaleroundup.com