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Wyoming issues historic human health warning to residents of Pinedale *Oil and gas development responsible for previous ozone spikes*

PINEDALE – Wyo. – Deteriorating air quality from oil and gas development in Wyoming’s Upper Green River Valley prompted the first-ever ozone-related human health warning from the state Department of Environmental Quality to a region once renowned for its clean air.

The DEQ’s advisory took effect on Wednesday, Feb. 27 and is expected to be in effect for several more days.

“This should be a wake-up call to the Bureau of Land Management,” said Linda Baker, director of the Upper Green River Valley Coalition. “What’s going to happen to our air when we have 4,400-10,000 additional wells, as the BLM proposes?”

Earlier this month, the Denver office of the Environmental Protection Agency rejected a Bureau of Land Management study on expanded drilling in the Pinedale Anticline in part on the 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.

Roberts noted that the BLM has significantly underestimated the impacts 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.

“Ozone levels in the Pinedale Area have reached extremely significant levels - they’re affecting human health,” said Bruce Pendery, an attorney with the Wyoming Outdoor Council. “This is no

longer an unusual thing. We have to slow down oil and gas development until we get a handle on this.”

The EPA is currently considering strengthening national standards for ozone pollution to increase public health protection and prevent environmental damage. If strengthened, ozone limits would lead to additional scrutiny of BLM's current drilling plan for the Anticline and the region. The EPA's decision is due next month.

The BLM, meanwhile, is busy approving plans for more than 21,000 new wells in the valley. “Wyoming, one of the cleanest of clean-air states, is knocking on the door of violating the Clean Air Act,” Penderly added. “They should take corrective action now and not wait for the hammer to fall.”

While ozone is normally a summer-time problem in big cities like Denver and Los Angeles, Pinedale residents have been enduring extremely high ozone levels in recent winters. Ozone levels spiked to readings nearly double normal winter levels in 2005 and again in 2006. EPA officials, commenting on the 2006 pollution event, said that sources of pollution at ground level were to blame for the incident.

Ozone is an air pollutant that's formed when the sun's rays chemically alter emissions commonly found in vehicle exhaust and pollution from oil and gas development. High levels of ozone cause respiratory health impacts especially to children, the elderly and people with existing respiratory problems. Wyoming state health officials advised people in these sensitive groups to limit strenuous or extended outdoor activities, especially in the afternoon.

"Those with asthma and other respiratory problems will be adversely affected by the ozone levels that prompted this human health advisory," said Dr. Charles Hall, a retired Sublette County physician.

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 issued to the Upper Green River Valley.

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