

Sublette County teeters on threshold of new EPA ozone standard BLM's Pinedale drilling plan would push it over

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Pinedale WY – Today the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) strengthened national ozone pollution standards to protect human health and pushed Wyoming's rural Sublette County very close to crossing over the new limit.

At a press conference EPA announced the national ozone standard would change from 80 parts per billion (ppb) to 75 ppb, in recognition that high levels of ozone can cause respiratory health complications, increase risk of asthma, and death.

"Ozone is a powerful respiratory irritant and toxic agent," said Bruce Hayse M.D. of Jackson WY. "There now exists powerful evidence supporting the tightening of ozone levels. Recent medical studies have convincingly demonstrated that inhalation of high concentrations of ozone over even a short period of time is associated with heightened risk of breathing impairment, infection and even premature death. Particularly at risk would be those engaged in outside physical work, which would apply to many in Sublette County. Such work is advised against in the event of dangerous ozone levels. "

Though smog is not normally associated with rural Wyoming, since Sublette County began monitoring for ozone in 2005, several winter-time ozone spikes have matched levels found in heavily polluted urban areas such as Los Angeles and Denver. Most recently, three air advisory warnings were issued in the Green River Basin within 12 days of each other, and just yesterday ozone levels temporarily skyrocketed above 100 ppb at both the Jonah and Boulder monitoring stations.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (WDEQ) has linked these high ozone levels to increased emissions from natural gas production.

"Shell, Ultra, Questar and Encana have claimed that they are responsible neighbors committed to minimizing effects on our environment and communities," said Linda Baker, organizer for the Upper Green River Valley Coalition. "But all their advertising ink won't protect our children's health, our communities, and the air we breathe. Sublette County residents are counting on our state and federal governments to require operators to slow down until we find the best ways to mitigate these dangerous pollutants."

The new ozone standards will put additional pressure on the WDEQ and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to produce a responsible plan for expanded drilling on the Pinedale Anticline. According to the BLM's own modeling, emissions from the planned 4,400 additional drill rigs would easily send Sublette County over the new ozone limit.

"The new ruling has created a different playing field for the energy industry in the Upper Green River Basin" said Bruce Pendery, air quality expert for the Wyoming Outdoor Council. "They are going to have to find ways to adapt to ensure public health is protected."

According to Clean Air Act regulations, if the three year average of an air monitor's fourth highest reading for an 8-hour average goes over the new standard of 75 parts per billion(ppb), the entire county is labeled "nonattainment" – a designation that creates stricter industrial emission standards and a possible loss of federal transportation funds until the county comes back into "attainment".

That three-year averaging equation for the Boulder air station is currently 72.6 ppb, which is just below the new EPA threshold. But with so many wells planned for Sublette County, stabilizing the ozone level will take a heroic effort.

"Operators have proposed 4,400 wells on the Anticline, 1,800 wells in Moxa Arch, and are busy drilling 3,100 wells in the Jonah Field. But our air is already unhealthy with the gas rigs we have now," said Baker. "This new ozone standard will help local residents and gas field workers alike breathe a sigh of relief."