

CASPER STAR TRIBUNE

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Report: Wyoming development threatens park air quality

By *MIKE STARK*

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK -- Rapid energy development in western Wyoming is the biggest threat to pristine air quality for the larger Yellowstone area, and money for monitoring the pollution may be harder to come by, according to a new report.

Air quality in Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding federal lands is still "generally excellent," but emissions from expanding energy development in southwest Wyoming pose concerns for nearby wilderness areas, said the report by a group of federal and state scientists.

So far, there are no problems in nearby wilderness areas that can be tied to the emissions, "but the potential is very much there to have a problem," said Gallatin National Forest's Mark Story, the report's lead author.

But in the face of accelerating energy development, the future of some monitoring programs is uncertain, the report said.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality recently removed permit conditions requiring two energy companies to pay for air quality monitoring. U.S. Forest Service funding for a separate program also has been eliminated during budget belt-tightening. Additional monitoring measures, however, are being considered by the Bureau of Land Management in at least one natural gas drilling proposal in the Pinedale area.

Aside from finding ways to preserve the monitoring programs, agencies should also put more manpower toward analyzing and tracking the effects of energy development in Wyoming, the report said.

Already, staffs are stretched thin trying to respond to fast-paced development in Wyoming and Colorado.

"Additional staffing is needed to insure that adequate attention is given to protect the air quality in wilderness areas that the USFS is mandated to protect," the report said.

The report was prepared by the Greater Yellowstone Clean Air Partnership, which includes scientists from the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Geological Survey and the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality.

It's meant as an update to a 1999 air quality assessment that looked at similar issues.

In the latest report, the scientists examine the effects of four sources of air pollution -- urban industrial emissions, energy development, fires and snowmobiles -- on the air in the greater Yellowstone area.

The biggest concern is emissions from energy development, they said, especially in southern Wyoming, where pollution can drift into the Wind River range and wilderness areas where the government is mandated to protect Class 1 airsheds.

"The companies are doing a great job of controlling emissions," Story said. "The sheer size of it is what we're concerned about."

One drilling project in the Jonah II field outside Pinedale is progressing three times faster than originally proposed and has produced nitrogen oxide emissions six to eight times greater than first proposed, the report said.

Similar development is occurring in the Pinedale Anticline, where there are more drilling rigs than initially expected.

The development push is part of a national effort to increase domestic production. The key is to balance that priority with protection of natural resources, Story said.

In their report, the scientists caution against losing any of the air quality monitoring systems that have been in place for as long as 20 years or more.

"If things start to change, hopefully (monitoring) can pick it up. That's what it's supposed to do," said Terry Svalberg, an air quality specialist with the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

Government, industry and private parties are looking for ways to find long-term funding for the monitoring programs. So far, though, there's been nothing definite.

"I think the feeling is to continue with what we've been doing and possibly expand it if we can," Svalberg said.

Jonathan Ratner, Wyoming director of the Western Watersheds Project, said a lack of effective management of air quality issues in western Wyoming could lead to "a major train wreck."

Some of the progress has come from certain companies, he said, but a more proactive approach is needed by state and federal agencies, he said. Authorities in New Mexico recently formed a working group with government and industry representatives to head off any major pollution problems, Ratner said, and a similar approach could be used in Wyoming.