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Air quality problems threaten our clear skies

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Perspective

Colorado is trying to try to prevent Denver from being designated a “non-attainment” area for ozone pollution. Non-attainment designation can bring with it regulations on when you can use your fireplace, requirements for car inspections, and even recommendations on when children should be allowed outside for recess.

But that couldn't happen in Wyoming, right? Wrong.

A perfect storm has descended on Wyoming's Upper Green River Valley due to the rampant oil and gas development in the area being approved by the Bureau of Land Management. This perfect storm is destroying the valley's world-class air quality.

Ozone levels in and around the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields are already exceeding the legal standard set to protect human health. Not so far away, the National Park Service reports there have been statistically significant degrading trends in ozone levels in Yellowstone National Park.

Ozone is known to cause serious health problems, especially in the young and old and those with respiratory concerns. This past fall the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee of the EPA concluded that the current ozone standard needs to be substantially tightened to protect human health. Thus, western Wyoming faces the troubling scenario that more wells are being proposed and approved even though ozone standards are already being exceeded; at the same time the nation's leading health scientists are calling on EPA to significantly tighten those standards.

In addition to ozone problems in the Upper Green River Valley, very fine dust and soot (known as PM2.5) is also of great concern. The EPA recently strengthened the short-term standard that applies to PM2.5 in order to protect human health. The PM2.5 levels predicted by the Jonah Infill environmental impact statement to be generated by oil and gas development in the Upper Green River Valley, coupled with other sources, are much higher than this new standard.

PM2.5 is especially hazardous because people breathe it deeply into their lungs where it can cause lasting damage. A Dec. 6 Casper Star-Tribune article reported that a study in Utah found increased levels of PM2.5 resulted in more heart attacks, angina and chest pain. PM2.5 at the levels predicted in the Jonah Infill environmental impact statement could result in these kinds of severe impacts on human health.

Air quality monitoring in the Upper Green River Valley has been inconsistent, with the BLM admitting to its failure to monitor nitrous oxide levels for several years. Nitrous oxide emissions from the Pinedale Anticline field are now more than three times the level originally predicted. Nitrous oxides contribute to ozone formation as well as to the haze that

obscures views of the Wind River Mountains and other priceless vistas. As Judy Walker of Pinedale said in the Christian Science Monitor in 2005, the pollution in the Upper Green River Valley is “this kind of light brown haze a lot like what I see when I’m in Denver that fuzzed up the mountains.”

Nitrogen compounds from nitrous oxides and other pollutants are also contributing to the acidification and fertilization of alpine lakes in the Wind River Mountains, which could have impacts on treasured trout fisheries. These compounds have reached levels in some lakes that are of “a major concern” to the U.S. Forest Service, according to one BLM report.

Wyoming has historically enjoyed some of the cleanest air in the nation, but it is losing that distinction because of the rate of energy development taking place in the state. With the loss of clean air, Wyoming jeopardizes the health of its citizens, its tourism industry, its fisheries, and its mountain lakes and streams. It jeopardizes the things that make Wyoming, Wyoming. Can you imagine having to tell children in Pinedale that they have to stay inside because the air is dangerous for them to breathe? It is bad enough to consider that in Denver. Unthinkable in Wyoming. But some areas in Wyoming, like the Upper Green River Valley, are moving in that direction.

It doesn’t have to be this way. The technology exists to minimize emissions from natural gas production. Some of these techniques are currently in use but more could be applied and applied more widely. Emissions from drill rigs can be reduced to a greater degree, oil and gas well infrastructure emissions can be better regulated, many fewer truck trips to and from wells are possible, and BLM can, if necessary, regulate the pace of development to ensure air quality is not degraded to unhealthy levels.

Wyoming citizens are proud of their clean air, healthy wildlife and healthy lifestyle. To make sure these values are here for future generations, we need to act now. Please tell the BLM and the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality not to let our clean air be sacrificed as energy development occurs in the Upper Green River Valley, and other areas of rural Wyoming.

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