



**News**

# N.M. pollution may push area into violations

## Four Corners could be considered in 'non-attainment' by the EPA

May 30, 2008

By Dale Rodebaugh | Herald Staff Writer

Southwest Colorado, given its proximity to coal-fired power plant pollution in New Mexico, could exceed federal air-quality standards this summer.

This was one of the take-home messages delivered at an air-quality forum Thursday at Fort Lewis College. The daylong meeting brought together representatives of federal, state, local and tribal groups as well as representatives of health-care and environmental organizations.

"Very serious air-quality issues need to be addressed, particularly ozone," said Mary Uhl, bureau chief at the New Mexico Environment Department. "Unless something unusual happens, we (San Juan County, N.M.) will be in non-attainment this summer."

Because pollution knows no boundaries, Southwest Colorado could follow suit, Uhl said. The Four Corners, she said, is home to two coal-fired power plants with another one projected, 19,000 oil and natural-gas wells with 12,000 more projected for the next 20 years, as well as many small unregulated sources of pollution.

A science advisory panel at the Environmental Protection Agency recommended the ozone limit be 60 to 70 parts per billion, but the head of the agency, a political appointee, overrode the recommendation and set the limit at 75 ppb, Uhl said. Consequently, Mesa Verde National Park and Navajo Reservoir are flirting with the cap.

"Ozone is a health risk," Uhl said. "If it's a bad summer, Mesa Verde could be in non-attainment."

But exceeding the ozone mark could have its up side, Uhl said.

"We see this as a positive because it would require control measures be set," Uhl said. "Mesa Verde is a national park with outdoor activities."

Seven Class I sites - national parks or wilderness areas - are in the region, she said.

Federal air-quality guidelines measure carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide and volatile organic compounds.

In addition to high ozone levels, the Four Corners faces air-quality issues such as haze, greenhouse-gas emissions, mercury and nitrate pollution and increased emissions from transportation and nonmobile sources, Uhl and others said.

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Patrick Cummins, representing the Western Regional Air Partnership, an association of 15 states, tribes and federal agencies, said that no matter what the environmental problem is, the culprits are the same - coal-fired power plants, vehicles, mining, construction and agricultural activity.

"No matter what we talk about, the sources are the same," Cummins said.

Koren Nydick, director of the Mountain Studies Institute, spoke about mercury precipitation in Southwest Colorado and the San Juan Mountains.

San Juan County in northwestern New Mexico is the fifth-largest emitter of mercury among all counties in the nation, Nydick said.

"Measurements of mercury are scarce in the region, but existing data show very high concentrations in precipitation at Mesa Verde National Park. There also are mercury fish advisories at McPhee, Narraguinnep, Sanchez and Navajo reservoirs, which are due in part to air pollution."

The Mountain Studies Institute began studying mercury in the environment last year, taking measurements in precipitation, lake zooplankton and lake sediment. Mercury at high level in humans can harm organs.

Uhl spoke about New Mexico's policies to minimize exposure to mercury by reducing or eliminating emissions and use of products containing mercury when possible.

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## Creating Community

by Jane Looney

### Durango needs ozone monitor

June 4, 2008

Living in Southwest Colorado gives us a sense of security when it comes to our air quality. Yet, we hear about mercury-laden fish in our lakes, high ground-level ozone and regional haze/visibility pollution in Mesa Verde National Park. Recently, San Juan Basin Health Department issued a health advisory because of prescribed burns in the area.

#### On the Net

Four Corners Air Quality Task Force: [www.nmenv.state.nm.us/aqb/4C](http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/aqb/4C)

Air Now: [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov)

For kids: [www.epa.gov/students/air.htm](http://www.epa.gov/students/air.htm)

Interagency Monitoring of Visual Environments: [vista.cira.colostate.edu/improve/](http://vista.cira.colostate.edu/improve/)

Large prescribed burns, and open burning in general, emit a number of pollutants, mostly measured as fine, breathable particles known as PM 2.5. Our area used to have an air-quality monitor that specifically measured these types of particulates. However, it was removed five years ago because of state budget cuts. The department is actively campaigning for another one. The PM 2.5 monitor would quantify contaminants providing a specific level of health risk and help measure other very fine combustion particulates - including engine and coal smoke - which contribute to degradation of our airshed.

Ground-level or "bad" ozone also contributes to local air-quality degradation. Rather than being emitted directly into the air, it's created by chemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds in the presence of sunlight. Emissions from industrial facilities and electric utilities, motor-vehicle exhaust and gasoline vapors are some of the major sources of NOx and VOC. Locally, there is added concern about the cumulative emissions from regional power plants and the interstate gas industry.

Farmington and Mesa Verde are at risk for exceeding standards of ground-level ozone. Other sites, maintained by the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, nearly approach these levels. If points all around us are at such levels, where is Durango? An ozone monitor is needed here, particularly as it's the most populous area in Southwest Colorado and community members have a right to know local ozone conditions.

Breathing ozone can trigger varied health problems including chest pain, coughing, throat irritation and congestion,

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according to the EPA. It can worsen bronchitis, emphysema and asthma. "Bad" ozone also can reduce lung function. Healthy people also experience difficulty breathing when exposed to ozone pollution. Because ozone forms in hot weather, anyone who spends time outdoors in the summer may be affected, particularly children, outdoor workers and people exercising.

Ground-level ozone also damages vegetation and ecosystems. It increases susceptibility to diseases, pests and other stresses such as harsh weather. Tree foliage is also damaged, affecting the landscape of cities, national parks, forests and recreation areas.

It's essential to have monitoring of each pollutant so that we know what's going on in our area. This would enable us to provide timely health alerts as well as provide clear data on which to base control measures or policy decisions. We need to be vigilant because air quality is crucial to protecting our health, quality of life and this irreplaceable environment we call home.

*Jane Looney is communications director with the San Juan Basin Health Department.*



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