

Air pollution puts small town in a haze

The region's booming natural gas industry gets the blame for rising ozone levels.

BOULDER, Wyo. (AP) — There isn't anything metropolitan about this tiny unincorporated town in southwest Wyoming, where a few single-family homes and a volunteer fire station stand against a skyline of snowcapped mountains.

But Boulder, with a population of just 75 people, has one thing in common with major metropolitan areas: air pollution thought enough to pose health risks.

"Used to be you could see horizon to horizon, crystal clear. Now you got this," said Craig Jensen as he gestured to a pale blue sky that he says is not as deeply colored as it used to be. "Makes you wonder what it's going to do to the grass, the trees and the birds."

The pollution, largely from the region's booming natural gas industry, came in the form of ground-level ozone, which has exceeded healthy levels 11 times since January and caused Wyoming to issue its first ozone alerts. Now the ozone threatens to cost the industry and taxpayers millions of dollars to stay within federal clean-air laws.

Sublette County is home to one of the largest natural gas reserves in North America, and it is dotted with hundreds of gas wells to supply the nation's growing demand for cleaner-burning fuel. Thousands more wells are



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planned. But pollution from vehicles and equipment in the gas fields — along with dust, weather and geography — has raised ozone to a level that rivals those of big cities in the summertime.

Wyoming's ozone problem comes at a time when the federal government has strengthened its ozone restrictions to better protect public health. In March, the Environmental Protection Agency set a new ozone standard of 75 parts per billion, down from 80 parts per billion.

The peak eight-hour average for ozone near Boulder reached 122 parts per billion on Feb. 21 and 102 parts per billion on March 11. By comparison, the Los Angeles area hit a peak average of 152 parts per billion last summer, and Denver recorded a

peak of 98 parts per billion last July.

Failure to meet federal air-quality standards could result in mandatory pollution-cutting measures ranging from restricting wood-burning stoves in homes to placing limits on the booming oil and gas industry.

Jeremy Nichols, director of the Denver-based Rocky Mountain Clean Air Action, said all economic development in the region — not just the energy industry — could be affected.

"If we don't get ahead of the curve, we could be suffering serious consequences in the future," Nichols said.

Conservation groups have seized on the ozone alerts in their efforts to curb drilling for natural gas in the area.

"Obviously, the pace and level

of development is just too much," said Linda Baker of the Upper Green River Valley Coalition.

The energy industry says it has been working with regulators to ease the problem and insists drilling should not be curtailed.

Ozone is a component of smog, a yellowish haze of pollutants that lingers near ground level and can raise the risk of asthma and heart attacks, especially among older people and children with respiratory illnesses.

Ozone needs sunlight to form, and state environmental officials believe the ozone levels in Wyoming this past winter and spring were exacerbated by heavy snow cover, which intensified the sunlight by reflecting it off the snow.

Also contributing to the situation are rare temperature inversions, when cold air is trapped close to the ground, and the surrounding mountains, which enclose the pollution in the Green River valley.

Gas developers in the area are sharing information on how best to reduce ozone, according to Randy Teewan, a spokesman for Echnaca Corp., one of the largest gas suppliers. Echnaca already is using natural gas-powered drilling rigs that emit less pollution, and it is consolidating field operations to reduce emissions.

State officials are working with the industry to reduce emissions without waiting for new federal regulations to take effect.

"We understand that the people who are living up there cannot wait two or three years for us to develop regulatory tools," said David Finley with the State Department of Environmental Quality.

Air pollution sends bees off-course, study finds

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Air pollution interferes with the ability of bees and other insects to follow the scent of flowers to their source, undermining the essential process of pollination, a study by three University of Virginia researchers suggests.

Their findings may help unravel the current pollination crisis that is affecting a variety of crops. Scientists are trying to determine why honeybees and bumblebees are dying off, and the new study indicates that emissions from power plants and automobiles may play a part.

Scientists already knew that scent-bearing hydrocarbon molecules released by flowers can be destroyed when they come into contact with pollutants.

Environmental sciences professor Jose Fuentes at the University of Virginia — working with graduate students Quinn McFrederick and James Kahl-lankal — used a mathematical model to determine how flowers' scents travel with the wind and how quickly they come into contact with pollutants that can destroy them.

In the prevailing conditions before the 1800s, the researchers calculated that a flower's scent could travel between 3,280 feet and 4,000 feet, Fuentes said. But

today, that scent might travel only 650 feet to 1,000 feet in highly polluted areas.

This phenomenon triggers a cycle in which the pollinators have trouble finding sufficient food and, as a result, their populations decline, the researchers said. That, in turn, translates into decreased pollination and keeps flowering plants from proliferating.

Fuentes said air pollution rapidly eliminates as much as 90 percent of flowers' aroma.

Since 2006, honeybee colonies in the United States also have been suffering from a widespread phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder, in which adult worker bees abandon an otherwise healthy hive.

John Burand, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who is studying bee colony collapses, said the effects of air pollution described in the new report are probably not directly related to that phenomenon.

But he said in an e-mail: "There is no doubt that air pollution and air quality are having an effect on bees and other pollinators. It appears there is more than one factor that is contributing to the CCD (colony collapse disorder) phenomenon we are seeing with bees, and certainly air pollution in some fashion may be playing a role."



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