

Company seeks emission swap, Sublette residents voice concerns



Workers burn off excess natural gas in this 2005 photo before moving a drill rig to another location in the Jonah Field in southwest Wyoming. Gas field emissions have been linked to elevated ozone levels in the Pinedale area. (Jeff Gearino, Star-Tribune file)

By JEFF GEARINO
Southwest Wyoming bureau
Tuesday, February 10, 2009 9:02 PM MST

PINEDALE -- Allowing gas-producing giant EnCana to tweak its ozone-causing emissions in the Jonah Field is a bad idea that could actually increase levels of the dangerous pollutant, local people told Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality officials Monday night.

The company wants state approval to reduce volatile organic compounds emissions while increasing nitrogen oxides emissions at some production facilities in the massive gas field, EnCana officials said.

Locals were wary of the proposal, however, and said the move undermines efforts to reduce harmful ozone levels in the Upper Green River Basin.

"We don't know at this point in time if this is something good or not," said Mike Kramer of Pinedale.

"By increasing (nitrogen oxides emissions), you may (cause) a huge increase in the amount of ozone produced," Kramer warned.

A handful of Sublette County residents spoke overwhelmingly against a proposal by EnCana Oil and Gas (USA) Inc. to amend its DEQ air quality permit during a public hearing Monday night.

EnCana requested the permit change as part of an overhaul of 32 of the company's gas-condensate production facilities in the field. EnCana is the county's single largest gas producer.

At ground level, ozone is a potentially poisonous gas that can cause breathing problems in children, the elderly and in people with existing respiratory conditions.

Ground-level ozone is created by chemical reactions between nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds in the atmosphere in the presence of sunlight. Many locals believe both pollutants are created chiefly by the burning of fossil fuels at ground level by companies operating in the Jonah Field.

State officials say the key to reducing ground-level ozone is to cut both types of emissions. Scientists say the tricky part is to know when and where to cut the emissions.

DEQ's Air Quality Division drafted an interim plan last summer that called for reductions in both pollutants.

Under the EnCana proposal, the company's nitrogen oxides emissions in the Jonah Field would increase by about 77 tons per year. But company officials contend that would be offset by a huge emission reduction of about 525 tons in volatile organic compounds.

EnCana proposes to utilize those "credits" of excess emissions of volatile organic compounds to offset the expected increases in nitrogen oxides emissions that would result from the project, company spokesman David Stewart said.

"It's important to control both VOC and NOX emissions ... (the data) shows emission reductions can be achieved while continuing to develop the Jonah Field," Stewart said.

But local people said allowing the company to increase its nitrogen oxides emissions could actually result in increased levels of ozone. They accused DEQ of not following its own interim plan, which calls for reductions in both pollutants.

"I think the interim policy expected both NOX and VOC would be reduced ... trading VOC for NOX makes absolutely no sense to me," Carmel Kail told DEQ officials. "A broad-based reduction approach for NOX and VOC on all levels makes more sense to me."

Mary Lynn Worl agreed.

"It was our understanding ... increases in NOX or VOC would no longer be justified, and now you're proposing an increase in NOX by 77 tons per year," said Worl, the chairwoman of the Pinedale-based Citizen United for Responsible Energy Development, or CURE.

"NOX is a concern and a human health hazard in its own right," she said. "The health of Sublette's citizens should be of paramount importance."

Ozone problem

The Upper Green River Basin has registered at least slightly elevated levels of ozone in three of the last four winters. Researchers now recognize that the estimated 5,000 natural gas wells in the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields has a lot to do with that trend.

Last winter, DEQ issued five ozone warnings for the region, the first ever issued by the state agency for the county.

The ozone warnings prompted the ire and concern of local residents at the time and sent energy operators in the region scrambling to find ways to reduce ozone-forming emissions.

The agency has issued two ozone advisories this year, but thus far this winter, ozone levels have not reached the 75 parts per billion level federal regulators consider unhealthy.

Bill Rozier Jr. criticized DEQ's position under which volatile organic compounds are favored to be reduced over nitrogen oxides emissions.

"That argument is very weak ... and that model is not being demonstrated in Sublette County," he said.

"If we don't want federal intervention ... we need to get a good handle on all emissions and cut both NOX and VOC emissions," Rozier said.

Daniel rancher Perry Walker said he was wary of any credit offset proposal.

"This credit scheme ... is a violation of Air Quality Division authority and in my view compromises the DEQ's mission to protect human health and the environment," Walker said. "You don't need to reward EnCana by conjuring up a baseless credits-trading scheme."

Southwest Wyoming bureau reporter Jeff Gearino can be reached at 307-875-5359 or at gearino@tribcsp.com.