

Officials extend ozone advisory through today

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GREEN RIVER -- Thankfully, ozone levels in the Upper Green River Basin never reached unhealthy status Wednesday around Pinedale as predicted.

Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality officials issued an ozone advisory Tuesday warning area residents that conditions were ripe for unhealthy levels of ozone the next day.

Those levels never occurred, according to DEQ ozone monitors located in Pinedale, Boulder and Daniel.

The agency's Air Quality Division, however, extended the advisory to today, again warning Sublette County residents that ozone levels could hit unhealthy levels.

The highest one-hour average for ozone levels recorded Wednesday around 3:30 p.m. at the Boulder monitoring station was 52 parts per billion.

Federal regulations limit ozone air pollution to no more than 75 parts per billion during an eight-hour period.

The DEQ advisory predicted that the factors and weather conditions necessary for the formation of ozone could occur sometime today in the Pinedale area.

Those conditions include low winds, lots of snow cover, bright sunlight and a strong temperature inversion that can trap a warm air mass on top of a cold air mass, compressing it toward Earth.

The alert advised people who might be sensitive to ozone -- including children, the elderly and those with existing respiratory conditions -- to avoid any extended, strenuous outdoor activity while the advisory is in effect.

Elevated levels of ozone -- a noxious gas and respiratory irritant -- can cause breathing problems in people and animals and can trigger headaches and burning eyes.

Ozone gas is created when sunlight hits hydrocarbons and oxides of nitrogen that are present in the atmosphere. Both are pollutants created chiefly by the burning of fossil fuels at ground level. The dead of winter in the Pinedale region, it turns out, can sometimes provide perfect conditions for ozone creation.

The DEQ has monitored elevated ozone levels during the wintertime in Sublette County since 2005. Last winter, DEQ officials issued a total of five ozone warnings for the region.

Scientists believe the ongoing natural gas development in the county -- including some 5,000 oil and gas wells in the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields -- contributed to the elevated levels of ozone in three of the last four winters. Operators in the fields have been working to reduce their emissions in recent years to combat the problem.

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