

# Panel rejects Sublette ozone petition

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CHEYENNE -- The Wyoming Environmental Quality Council unanimously rejected a citizen request to consider stricter air pollution standards in Sublette County, which has been plagued in recent years by elevated ozone levels.

Before the 7-0 vote Tuesday, members of the council cited various reasons not to pursue the petition: they didn't like imposing a different air pollution standard on just one of the state's 23 counties; they noted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is reviewing the national ozone standard; and current efforts by the state and industry to clean up the air in the county seem to be working.

Supporters of the petition said they would consider other avenues to pursue their goal.

"There may be other ways to skin this cat other than this petition and process," Bruce Pendery of the Wyoming Outdoor Council said. "And so we will look at those other options, like focusing more on the EPA effort, for example."

Ozone is a respiratory irritant that isn't normally a concern in rural areas like southwest Wyoming.

Sublette County has had elevated ozone levels during the winter that state health officials believe was caused by intense natural gas drilling, snowcover, the area's terrain and temperature inversions. The problem prompted state officials to issue Wyoming's first ozone alerts in early 2008.

Seeking to protect the health of county residents, a Pinedale-based group, Citizens United for Responsible Energy Development in Pinedale, petitioned the council to impose ozone pollution limits that are tougher than those now in effect for the rest of the state and nation.

The petition drew opposition from the oil and gas industry, business groups, the Sublette County Commission and others.

Some opponents said this was no time to be imposing new, harsher restrictions on an industry that has laid off workers and cut back on operations because of the poor economy.

"It's a very critical period for businesses in Wyoming," David Bell, a commercial insurance agent from Pinedale, told the council.

Others noted that major oil and gas companies working in the county have spent millions of dollars and taken a number of measures to cut down on their emissions from trucks, drilling rigs and other equipment.

Air monitoring by the state Department of Environmental Quality found no violations of current ozone standards this past winter.

Mary Lynn Worl, chairman of Citizens United for Responsible Energy Development, said the group recognizes the improvements made by industry but it believes more can be done.

"Clean air is a Wyoming value," Worl said. "I can look out my window right now. I don't need any scientific instruments to say, 'Oh, doesn't look good out there.'"