

State board to hear group's request for stricter standards

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GREEN RIVER -- The state Environmental Quality Council will meet Wednesday in Rock Springs to consider a request to establish stricter air quality standards for dangerous ozone pollution.

The council's hearing in Sweetwater County is part of a process that will eventually determine whether the board will recommend to the governor that the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality stop using the current federal ozone standard that limits ozone pollution to no more than 75 parts per billion during any given eight-hour period.

A Pinedale citizens' group -- Citizens for Responsible Energy Development (CURED), with support from the Wyoming Outdoor Council and the Western Resource Advocates --

petitioned the EQC in April asking for the state to lower its standard to help ease ozone pollution concerns in Sublette County.

The county has been plagued by rare, winter-time ozone pollution over the past few years. In 2007, state officials issued the first ozone alert for southwest Wyoming.

The petition said the state should use a lower ambient air quality standard of 65 ppb, which the group claimed will protect the public from the impacts of ozone pollution.

Bruce Pendery, program director for the Outdoor Council, said the current ozone standard does not protect public health.

"We are anxiously anticipating this hearing," Pendery said in an e-mail late last week.

"It will allow the council to start to grapple with the significant and important question of whether our health is adequately protected under the current national standard for ozone, or whether Wyoming should exercise its rights and establish a more stringent standard," Pendery said.

If the EQC sets a lower standard, it could result in stricter emission standards in the lucrative Jonah and Pinedale Anticline gas fields in Sublette County.

Industry officials believe the EPA has adequately set standards for ozone and contend the industry has worked hard in the past few years to reduce ozone-causing emissions in the two fields.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's air quality standard of 75 ppb during any recorded eight-hour period is currently being revised by the agency, and the federal standard could be further strengthened later this year.

Ground-level ozone can pose a health threat to children, the elderly and people with respiratory problems. A recent New England Journal of Medicine study concluded long-term, low-level exposure to ozone can also be lethal.

The state EQC is a seven-member citizen advisory group appointed by the governor. The EQC also has the authority to make "very rare or uncommon" designations under the Wyoming Environmental Quality Act.

The role of the EQC came under scrutiny by lawmakers this past session. A bill to strip the council of its authority to designate land as "very rare or uncommon" passed the Legislature but was vetoed by Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

Nonattainment

The Upper Green River Basin has registered at least slightly elevated ozone levels in several of the past winters. In the winter of 2007-08, the pollutant exceeded the federal ozone standard of 75 ppbs on 14 days.

The ozone warnings prompted Gov. Dave Freudenthal in March to submit a recommendation to the EPA seeking to designate a huge portion of southwest Wyoming -- including all of Sublette County and the massive Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields -- as a federal ozone nonattainment area.

More than 5,000 new oil and gas wells have been drilled in the two fields in recent years, prompting many residents to push for a slowdown in energy development in order to improve the region's air quality.

Scientists believe emissions from motor vehicle exhaust, industrial facilities and other fossil-fuel sources in the two gas fields and elsewhere -- when combined with the right meteorological conditions of snow cover, warm weather and temperature inversions -- can cause dangerous ozone at ground level.

At the state's behest, EnCana Oil and Gas, Inc. and other operators in Sublette County have taken various steps to reduce emissions from the field that contribute to the formation of ozone, including converting diesel-powered drilling rigs to run on natural gas-fired engines.

The industry has also implemented strict contingency plans aimed at curbing ozone-causing pollutants when state officials predict conditions will be ripe for ozone formations.

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