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Ozone raises its ugly head in rural Utah

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People who visited eastern Utah's vast open spaces last winter might have thought they were doing their lungs a big favor by taking a deep breath of fresh, country air. But it turns out, they would have been better off going to Los Angeles or most other major cities.

According to new air-pollution data, breathing air around the oil and gas fields of the remote Uinta Basin was "unhealthy" on 40 days this past winter.

The problem was on par with the worst summertime ozone tracked by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the nation's most polluted place, San Bernardino County, Calif. In addition, Uintah County's ozone topped the worst high-ozone days in Salt Lake City and even industrial hubs such as Houston and Los Angeles.

David Garbett, an attorney with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA), said he was "pretty shocked" by the results from last winter's ozone monitoring — the first time comprehensive data were gathered in the area.

"This is up there," he said, "with the worst ozone pollution problems anywhere in the country."

The stunning findings have created new tension between an industry that is vital to the local economy and the need to ensure healthy air for people who live and work in the Uinta Basin.

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Unexpected • One reason Uinta Basin pollution is causing so much concern is that no one expects ozone to be a problem in winter — anywhere — particularly in a place with so few people and so few big industrial plants.

An odorless, colorless gas often called "smog," ground-level ozone is typically a problem during the summer, when the sun cooks the pollution and causes something like a "sunburn" to the lungs

Like other types of air pollution, ozone can aggravate asthma in sensitive people and affect children, people with heart or lung problems and the elderly. But it also causes irreversible damage to the lungs of healthy people who breathe it during exercise or exertion.

Up until a few years ago, no one thought to consider ozone pollution in the rural West because everyone regarded it as a summertime problem in big cities.



STEVE GRIFFIN | The Salt Lake Tribune The first comprehensive ozone readings for the Uinta Basin suggest the oil and gas industry is pumping alarmingly high pollution into the skies -- as high as anywhere in the country. This testing station is located along the Green River near the town of Ouray.

"No one was really looking for ozone in the winter," said Richard Payton, an environmental engineer for the EPA.

But high-ozone readings in Wyoming and Colorado energy-production areas a few years ago made everyone reconsider. And, as part of an enforcement agreement with one energy company, two air-quality monitors were installed in Uintah County last year.

Quality test results sent to the EPA indicated that readings in December through March were as high as 123 parts per billion at a monitor off a remote service road near Ouray, while another near Dead Man's Bench at Red Wash recorded levels near 105 ppb.

"We were shocked by the levels and the persistence" in the basin, Payton said.

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Unanswered questions • The EPA would have to see at least three consecutive years of high readings from official monitors before it could regulate the basin under the Clean Air Act. Plus, the agency has many unanswered questions — about whether oil and gas wells are causing the ozone problem, whether ozone is a threat every winter, and what measures can be taken — short of regulation — to reduce the impact.

"It is equally important for the people in the Uinta Basin to have clean air," Payton said, "as it is for people in Salt Lake City."

There are similar concerns at the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which oversees drilling permits for oil and gas development on about three-fourths of the land in the basin, much of it owned by the Ute Indians.

Leonard Herr, an air-quality specialist at BLM's state office, said the ozone problem has to be factored into the BLM's drilling plans, but at this point, it isn't clear how.

"This is something nobody foresaw," he said. "These numbers are high, and there are people out there" who must be protected from unhealthy air just like people in cities.

SUWA has been making the same argument for years. And with the new ozone data, the conservation group is once again pressing the BLM to act.

Currently, the BLM is reviewing requests by four companies to drill up to 17,000 new natural-gas wells in the basin. Both the EPA and the BLM said their goal isn't a regulatory crackdown and that it is far too early to establish new limits — such as fewer new wells or temporary shutdowns.

"No one wants this area to go into non-attainment," said Herr, echoing a sentiment shared by Payton.

The oil and gas industry, which has been talking about air quality with regulators for years, also agrees on this point.

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Industry concerns • Kathleen Sgamma of the Western Energy Alliance told a state legislative committee Wednesday that federal regulators are unwilling to work with the industry to avert a worst-case scenario. In fact, she told Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment Interim Committee that BLM and EPA policies have already cost \$1.8 billion in lost investments and 7,500 jobs.

"We're finding deaf ears in [the U.S. Department of the] Interior on some of these issues," she said, "and, certainly, deaf ears at the EPA."

The industry has asked state lawmakers for help in fending off federal regulation, possibly by providing the Utah Division of Air Quality with more funding to deal with the Uinta Basin and prodding the BLM to issue drilling permits faster.

But even before the EPA takes action — and it appears to be years away from doing so — lawmakers are lamenting its industry-crushing interference.

Sen. Margaret Dayton, R-Orem, says the agency has an “absolute commitment to destroy the drilling efforts we have out here.”

Other members of the committee said they were ready to enlist in the fight.

Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab, said federal obstruction has reached a breaking point.

“They’re stealing money from our kids and our grandkids,” Noel said, “and it’s got to stop.”

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Air pollution in the Uinta Basin

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers ozone concentrations of 75 parts per billion or higher “unhealthy,” and the standard is expected to be tightened during the next few weeks.

The EPA doesn’t include Uintah County on its “non-attainment” list for ozone, but because of the county’s small population, there has never been a requirement for air-pollution testing. Federal agencies are working with the Utah Department of Environmental Quality to add monitors in Fruitland, Duchesne County, Price, Carbon County and two on Ute Indian tribal lands in Uintah County this winter to learn more about the problem.

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Ozone: Uintah County vs. Salt Lake County

Last winter, one air-quality monitor in Uintah County, near Ouray, recorded an eight-hour average concentration of 123 parts per billion of ozone, topping the federal standard on 40 days. A monitor at Red Wash logged an eight-hour average of 105 ppb and exceeded the standard on 30 days.

In comparison, the highest level reached by a monitor in Salt Lake Valley last summer was 91 ppb, and none of the valley’s ozone monitors violated the EPA’s 75-ppb standard more than three times.

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