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Reader View: Report shows New Mexico air needs to improve

By Jon Goldstein | Posted: Monday, May 11, 2015 7:00 pm

It's report card time for air quality in the U.S. and, unfortunately, New Mexico and several Western states are getting grades of "needs improvement." That's the takeaway from the American Lung Association's recently released annual "State of the Air" report. When it comes to unhealthy ozone pollution (commonly referred to as "smog"), New Mexico and several Western states are simply not making the grade.

Once mainly seen in major urban areas, smog pollution is now becoming more and more of an issue in the Mountain West. This is bad news for local residents, as smog can cause serious health impacts like aggravated asthma, chronic bronchitis and heart attacks.

This problem is especially acute in New Mexico. According to the ALA report, our two most populous counties got D and F grades for ozone-related air quality. This means almost 900,000 New Mexicans (almost half the state) live in a county that is impacted by unhealthy air.

Unfortunately, air pollution from oil and gas development is one of the main culprits across the region. Ozone pollution is created by an interaction between two different sorts of air pollutants, oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Oil and gas development provides a significant source of both of these air contaminants across many parts of the West.

In addition to smog, oil and gas development also can lead to an increase in methane pollution — a potent greenhouse gas. Scientists recently identified a methane hot spot the size of Delaware over the San Juan Basin — the highest concentration of methane pollution in the nation. Methane is the main component of the natural gas produced from tens of thousands of wells across the San Juan Basin and is typically emitted from the same sorts of sources as ozone-forming VOCs. Strong action is clearly needed now to broadly address this pollution problem and better protect the health of New Mexicans.

In the report, 14 counties across the Rocky Mountain region (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) received failing grades from the ALA due to unhealthy levels of ozone pollution and an additional six counties received D grades. This includes Bernalillo and Doña Ana counties in New Mexico. San Juan and Eddy counties didn't fare well either, receiving C's from the ALA for their levels of harmful ozone pollution.

Fortunately, sensible and cost-effective measures exist to fix this problem and several states in the Rocky Mountain region are moving to put these measures into place. Specifically, Colorado passed a statewide, nationally leading rule to substantially reduce emissions of methane and volatile organic compounds from oil and gas production. And, while more statewide action is warranted in Wyoming to address new problem areas, the Cowboy State is also at the forefront of smart air regulations finalizing requirements to reduce pollution from oil and gas sources in its Upper Green River Basin through regular leak detection inspections and other requirements.

Unfortunately, as our neighbors are moving ahead on strong new rules to limit air pollution, New Mexico is falling behind and putting the health of local residents at risk. New federal rules expected this summer from the Bureau of Land Management and the Environmental Protection Agency to limit methane pollution and waste will help solve this problem. But much work remains to be done.

As the ALA report card shows, more action across the region is needed to clean up the air. It's now time for regulators in New Mexico and across the region to hit the books and for the region's oil and gas operators to button up their facilities and improve the air quality for all Westerners.

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