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Air Quality Board Aims to Clear the Air

After decades of improving Utah's air to meet federal standards, the Air Quality Board is now faced with a new challenge: Federal standards for particle air pollution just got a whole lot tougher, and that could mean the entire Wasatch Front and Cache Valley will soon be out of compliance with parts of the Clean Air Act.

"I take the long-term view," said Ernest Wessman, an Air Quality Board member since 2001 who recently retired as vice president of resource development and environment for PacifiCorp. "I look back at the 1970s and how difficult it looked for regulators and industry to be able to implement the tough air quality standards that were imposed on them at that time. The result, however, is that the air is much cleaner than it has been in a long time. We now need to do more, even if we may not know how we'll get it done. But I don't feel hopeless. This is just the next stage of an ongoing process to achieve an even better air quality."



The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposes sweeping revisions to the regulations for particulate matter – those microscopic specks between 2.5 and 10 microns in diameter or smaller that can become lodged in people's lungs. The EPA proposal, expected to be finalized by September 2006, would retain the annual PM 2.5 standard of 15 micrograms per cubic meter (ug/m³), but the 24-hour standard would be lowered from the current standard of 65 ug/m³ to 35 ug/m³. That means if an area, such as Salt Lake County, has days that exceed that standard in any three-year stretch, it then comes under federal scrutiny and the Division of Air Quality (DAQ) must come up with a plan to curb the pollution.

"At this new level it is likely that Salt Lake, Davis, Utah, Weber, Cache and Box Elder counties would all be in non-compliance with the federal health standard for PM 2.5," said Rick Sprott, director of the

DAQ. “That means the state would have to prepare comprehensive plans to meet the standards in those areas by the year 2015.”

DAQ will explore the most effective way to reduce the pollution, which is primarily caused by automobiles, and it will provide the Board with input and recommendations. Ultimately, the decision will rest with the 11-member Board, which is the primary air quality policymaker for the state of Utah.

“This is something we need to get our arms around and develop a plan,” said Don Sorensen of Tesoro, who was appointed last year to represent the fuels industry. “It is our responsibility to follow EPA’s guidelines, as set out in the Clean Air Act. We need to take a look at where we are and where we need to go and understand the alternatives.”

Part of Utah’s problem is its topography. For example, the bowl shape of the Cache Valley contributes to severe winter pollution when inversions keep cold air next to the valley floor, trapping particulate matter. This area’s unique pollution problem will make it even tougher to comply with new EPA standards.

“It may be difficult to meet the new regulations but we have to continually make progress,” said Nan Bunker, an alfalfa grower from Delta appointed last year to represent the agriculture industry. “We do have a different situation here in Utah than other parts of the country. So our approach may be different. But instead of telling EPA we can’t meet the new regulations, we will work cooperatively with the federal government to come up with the best solution for Utah.”

Like the other advisory Boards representing the Department of Environmental Quality, the Air Quality Board is highly diverse. Its members represent various interests and professions across the state. They are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate. The Utah Air Conservation Act also requires that the Board members be knowledgeable about air pollution matters and empowers them to enact rules pertaining to Air Quality activities and develop State Implementation Plans to attain and maintain National Ambient Air Quality Standards under the Clean Air Act.

Despite the diverse nature of the Board, Bunker says they all have one common goal in mind: “We all want to make sure the air is clean.”

Collaboration Key to Environmental Challenges Ahead

International Conference brings Stakeholders to Table

Park City – Energy development in the West has created new environmental challenges that will require a new era of collaboration between state and federal governments, according to top officials with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).



LeahAnn Lamb, Director of OPPA, Utah DEQ, introduces speakers at the MSWG Conference in Park City, Utah June 27th, 2006

Robert Roberts, administrator for EPA's Region 8 Office in Denver since 2002, said 13 percent of EPA's budget is spent on energy-related projects. That's not surprising when considering one-fifth of the total amount of coal in the world is located in Region 8 that covers Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Utah. "I never expected I would be spending as much of my time on energy issues," Roberts said at the Multi-State Working Group (MSWG) 2006 Conference held here June 26-27.

Richard Otis, deputy associate administrator of the Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation at EPA's headquarters in Washington, DC, said EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson has made it clear that, "We will accelerate our pace of environmental protection and enhance economic competitiveness."

Otis and Roberts joined Richard Sprott, director of the Utah Division of Air Quality in leading a panel discussion on "Energy, Water and Innovation in the West," one of the plenary sessions at the MSWG, co-sponsored by the Utah Department of Environmental Quality and the Intermountain section of the American Waterworks Association.

Utah has become a leader in solving environmental problems through collaboration, Sprott said. "Our executive director, Dianne Nielson, practices the philosophy of partnership and collaboration. And we have made huge advances by doing so," he said. "But we also need to look at additional ways of doing things."

Collaboration and partnership doesn't always work, Sprott noted. "Any time the three-legged stool of law, policy and science gets broken, the system can collapse. Legal challenges, for instance, create winners and losers. And when a court makes a decision, the rulings can be very narrow and oftentimes the resulting disputes get remanded to EPA."

Even so, Utah has made strides in environmental improvements by taking the collaborative approach. For instance, the Western Regional Air Partnership formed to reduce haze over national parks has made substantial improvements in reducing sulfur dioxide emissions through the collaborative process of working together to set emission targets for industry.

"We need to continue to excel in our state and local partnerships," Sprott added.

DEQ's Wallace Awarded Recycler of the Year Award



Sonja Wallace, an 18-year veteran at the Department of Environmental Quality, received the Recycler of the Year Award from the Recycling Coalition of Utah at a June 8 recycling conference and e-waste summit held in Sandy.

Brad Mertz, executive director of Recycling Coalition of Utah (RCU), recognized Wallace for her enthusiasm and commitment to recycling. "She's a huge advocate," he said, "and a founding member of RCU."

Wallace, the pollution prevention coordinator in the Office of Planning and Public Affairs (OPPA), is the recycling coordinator for DEQ. She, however, began her career in 1988 as an environmental scientist for the Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste. It was Rusty Lundberg, branch manager for DSHS, who hired her.

"I hired her for her enthusiasm," Lundberg said. "She has always been focused on recycling. Sonja always finds ways to bring larger groups together and make it happen."

In 1990, she made recycling a full time job in OPPA, along with other responsibilities that include working with the public and businesses on solutions to reduce the amount of pollutants that end up in landfills or the environment.

Leah Ann Lamb, director of OPPA, lauded Wallace for her ability to work with businesses, government and environmental groups to get projects off the ground.

"Sonja has an ability to work collaboratively with stakeholders in pollution prevention projects that have produced results," said Lamb. "This award is recognition she truly deserves."

Wallace said she's just grateful to be recognized for a job she truly loves.

"I really am honored and pleased to get this award," she said. "It's for something that I'm very passionate about doing."

Governor Pushes PowerForward

Officials Offer Cool Ways to Conserve

Gov. Jon Huntsman, Jr. is taking on the heat in order to meet his statewide goal of a 20 percent increase in energy efficiency by 2015. On May 30, he signed an executive order directing state employees to heed PowerForward email alerts that signal the need to conserve electricity in the heat of the summer.

"This could have been a proclamation or a declaration," Huntsman said. "Instead, it is an executive order that I hope translates to everyone in the state that we mean business."



Governor Jon Huntsman, Jr. signs the PowerForward Executive Order

On June 1 the PowerForward conservation program kicked into high gear with a red-light green-light system that signals the peak times between noon and 8 p.m. when Utahns should put the brakes on turning up their air conditioners. On comfortably warm days a "Green" light triggers a message encouraging Utahns to use common sense conservation such as turning off the lights when not in use. On days when temperatures are pushing triple digits, a "Yellow" or "Red" light asks Utahns to conserve even more because that's when demand for electricity is highest and most expensive.

“The program started in 2001 as a simple alert system. It has progressed significantly to a broader program aimed at promoting an ethic of electricity conservation in Utah,” noted Dianne Nielson, director of the Department of Environmental Quality, which manages the program in partnership with electric companies. “The Web site www.powerforward.utah.gov will be the source of information. It also will provide a mechanism to send an email alert. There will be one alert for the Wasatch Front and another for Utah’s Dixie region, recognizing the needs and demands are different.”

PowerForward does work, officials said. In a given year there has been a savings of up to 100 megawatts of power, which equates to enough power for 70,000 homes, Nielson added. “That’s a big difference.”

Rich Walje, president of Utah Power, couldn’t agree more. “Frankly, in a residential home, about half of the electric energy use is used to cool something. ... The reason we like PowerForward, as a utility, is it actually works. The historic savings is basically the equivalent of half of a peaking power plant. By not using that energy, we also forgo investment in power plants.”

The Huntsman Administration has made PowerForward an integral part of its energy efficiency policy.

“PowerForward represents an essential piece of our energy efficiency platform,” said Laura Nelson, energy adviser for Huntsman. “It supports the necessary private-public partnership and it is an important educational tool that will help meet the state’s energy efficiency goal of 20 percent improvement by 2015.”

The executive order requires all cabinet members to submit annual reports to the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) regarding actions taken in response to PowerForward alerts and efforts to achieve the state’s 2015 energy efficiency goals. DEQ is to prepare a comprehensive report on each agency’s efforts for the Governor annually.

Utah’s E-Waste May Get Capitol Solution

The Utah Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste is supporting ongoing negotiations between industry, conservationists and state lawmakers over what to do with tons of antiquated electronics teeming with hazardous chemicals currently being dumped in municipal landfills across the state.

“We are very committed to having a process that has stakeholder involvement,” said Rusty Lundberg, branch manager for the Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste (DSHS). “We recognize e-waste is a problem that must be addressed.”

In September, state lawmakers will convene in interim session to tackle the issue as an alternative to legislation that did not pass during the 2006 session. Sen. Scott McCoy, D-Salt Lake, sponsored SB215, which would have banned electronic waste in landfills by 2007 and created a task force to look at the issue. “The landfill ban was meant to be a stick to prompt the task force to take the issue seriously,” McCoy said.

Rep. Ralph Becker, D-Salt Lake, had tried on earlier occasions to push e-waste legislation, also without success. His legislation would have required the Department of Environmental Quality to develop a Web site instructing Utahns about where they could recycle old electronics, like computers and televisions that are discarded to landfills where decaying circuit boards and PC screens could

leak toxic substances like mercury, lead and chromium. "We are seeing a lot of experimentation in other states," Becker said, "and I am encouraged the Legislature will finally address this issue."

Four other states have laws governing e-waste. California bans e-waste in municipal landfills and attaches a recycling fee to the purchase price of all electronic products to pay for disposal. Maine, Washington and Maryland require manufacturers to take back old products without charging consumers.

Dennis Downs, director of DSHW, says Utahns can take their old, obsolete gear to a hazardous waste collection point in Salt Lake County, which now has contracted with a reputable recycler, Colorado-based GRX (Guaranteed Recycling Xperts), to make it cost efficient for Utahns to drop off their e-waste. "When people have to pay to get rid of their old electronics it creates a disincentive," said Downs. "In the future we hope we can find ways to minimize the expense to homeowners so that old TVs and other equipment won't end up in the municipal landfills."

For lawmakers, environmentalists and retailers here in Utah, recycling means solving the quandary of e-waste that is growing in volumes. The Recycling Coalition of Utah held a recycling conference and e-waste summit on June 8, attended by industry executives, DEQ and EPA officials, along with Sen. McCoy and Rep. Becker.

According to Anne Peters, a national e-waste consultant, 1.2 percent of all municipal solid waste in the nation is e-waste. In Utah, 200,000 computers and televisions were recycled in 2004, 400,000 were disposed of in landfills, and 1.1 million were in storage. That, she said, is a missed economic opportunity for recyclers, adding that every 10,000 tons of e-waste could be generating 130 jobs.

Brad Mertz, director of Recycling Coalition of Utah, said he is committed to working with state lawmakers to come up with an approach to e-waste management. "We will put proposals together and we will move ahead with that challenge," he said.

There is precedence for state law to require recycling. Lawmakers previously approved a mandatory recycling fee attached to new tire purchases. That revenue is used to promote used tire recycling to ensure the old treads did not end up in the landfill. The program has been a huge success.

McCoy prefers the approach by three other states to require manufacturers to accept their antiquated products for recycling, noting that Dell and Hewlett Packard already do that voluntarily. But there is always resistance on Capitol Hill to those kinds of mandates.

"Lawmakers have a clean slate on this issue," McCoy said. "We have time before the 2007 session to come up with a legislative solution. There is always a chance it won't pass in 2007, but at least it will lay the groundwork for 2008."