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HEADLINES

Air quality stable

By Darren Marcy/The Daily Times
Mar 19, 2004, 10:19 am

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FARMINGTON — Nearly three dozen local residents listened Wednesday night as representatives of the New Mexico Environment Department gave them the good news about current local ozone levels and predictions for the future.

After extremely high levels of ozone were detected in San Juan County in 2002, officials and residents began worrying about the future since a growing population means more vehicles, and the oil and gas industry is expected to expand drilling and production efforts soon.

A study was conducted, modeling local ozone levels and the causes, with predictions stretching toward 2012.

The results show little to no anticipated increase in current ozone levels as increased environmental protection legislation comes online and other factors mitigate the increases that will happen with the growth.

"These are really important results," said Mary Uhl, planning and policy section manager of the New Mexico Air Quality Bureau, which is part of the state Environment Department.

One of the biggest reasons that ozone levels aren't anticipated to increase, however, is that man's impact on ozone levels in this area are just a small part of the overall problem.

Background ozone is high in the West, accounting for 65 percent to 90 percent of the ozone present at any given time.

In addition, biogenic emissions — that which comes from natural sources like trees — accounts for more ozone production than man-caused, or, anthropogenic sources.

Local sources, like oil and gas, automobile and power plants, were roughly equal in the amount of ozone they contributed.

Still it was a very small part of the overall ozone problem in the area, according to results of the modeling conducted by Alpine Geophysics from June through February.

Local ozone generating sources account for small amounts — often only 3-6 parts per billion. Background sources, conversely, were often in the 50-60 parts per billion range.

"Everything is contributing equally, but not a lot," Uhl said. "It's just a small piece of what's going on. The big bulk of what's happening here is the background and what's being transported into the area."

The federal limit for ozone is 85 parts per billion, a number the area pushed hard several times in 2002.

The modeling shows that the area's ozone levels are likely to be in the 72.8 to 74.8 parts per billion range in 2007. Those numbers aren't expected to change significantly through 2012.

"All of these predictions are well below the federal standard of 85 ppb," Uhl said.

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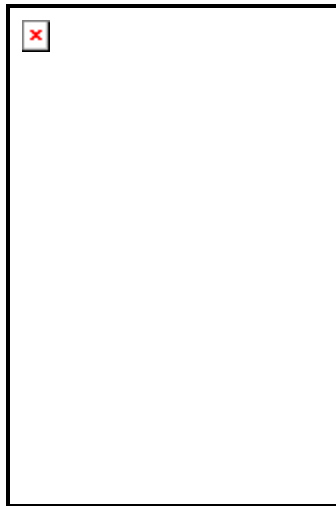
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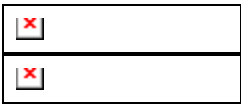
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Ben Chrisman/The Daily Times
Local sources of ozone in the air, like oil and gas production, automobiles and power plants — like the Four Corners Power Plant shown here Thursday at Morgan Lake — were found to be roughly equal in the amount of ozone they contribute, according to a New Mexico Environment Department study.



"We're well within that standard. We're expecting a flat trend."

Even by tweaking the model to account for some "what-ifs," the number remained fairly consistent, even when the model included data that simulated a more rapidly growing oil and gas field, a doubled amount of area source emissions, and a recalculation of automobile emissions to take into account that San Juan County has an older, and therefore more polluting, vehicle than national models consider.

Only a doubling of biogenic emissions — again, plants and trees — had a significant impact on the model.

The next step is to decide what, if anything, the local area wants to do about the little bit of ozone generation that does occur locally.

Several people in the audience questioned the logic of chasing a reduction when the amount to be reduced is already so small.

But the study was conducted under an Environmental Protection Agency Early Action Compact.

In 2002, the cities of Aztec, Bloomfield and Farmington, as well as San Juan County, the state Environment Department and the federal EPA signed the compact.

The funding for the study recently completed came as a result of this compact, which does not force any measures be taken, but it's not yet clear whether the compact can stay in place if no actions are taken.

San Juan County is just one of a handful of compacts in existence in the new program. The other locations are generally large metropolitan areas that are not in attainment or at risk of violating the 85 ppb federal standard.

They will all be submitting Clean Air Action Plans that include voluntary as well as enforceable measures to clean up their air.

Nobody was quite sure what the EPA would say about an area that is predicted to remain in attainment.

The consensus in the audience was that voluntary measures should be the course of action and there was hope in the room that the EPA would agree that would be good enough.

The risk of losing the Early Action Compact is that if the area does surpass the federal limit for ozone, the federal government could force action. With the compact in place, it would allow the area to have until at least 2007 to again be in attainment.

"San Juan County would lose this three year buffer it enjoys now as an Early Action Compact area," said Andy Berger, an environmental analyst with the state Air Quality Bureau.

However, a few in the audience pointed out that improving the local air quality is really the goal no matter what the models predict or what the federal standards are.

Studies have shown that ozone levels well below the 85 ppb standard can cause health problems.

If all ozone-producing sectors reduced their emissions a little bit, the over all air quality would improve, even if only slightly.

The Air Quality Bureau will file a draft version of the Clean Air Action Plan with the EPA by the end of this month.

More meetings are expected to be held after that, following which a revised copy of the plan will be sent to the EPA by May 31.

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