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Quick 'n' Dirty

Four Corners smog exceeds standard

It's official. Four Corners smog levels exceeded federal health standards for ozone air pollution last week. A monitor near Navajo Reservoir registered another high reading on June 11, which triggered federal action for New Mexico's San Juan County.

The region's two coal-fired power plants, tens of thousands of oil and gas compressors, motor vehicle exhaust, industrial facilities, and gas and chemical vapors are major contributors to the worsening air quality. When these nitrogen oxide emissions combine with volatile organic compounds and cook in the sun, a substance called ozone forms. Ozone, or smog, is particularly toxic for children and those who are active outdoors. When inhaled, ozone triggers respiratory ailments, including reduced lung capacity, bronchitis and aggravation of asthma. Repeated exposure over only a few months can cause permanent lung damage.

Recognizing these health hazards, the Environmental Protection Agency significantly strengthened its air quality standards for ground-level ozone in early March. By signing its most stringent ozone standards ever, the agency took steps to improve public health and protect sensitive trees and plants.

Two years ago, the New Mexico Environmental Department installed an ozone monitor at Navajo Reservoir. In that time, the monitor has registered an average ozone reading of 79 parts per billion, well above the new standard.

"We would need to see a reading of 64 this year at that station to stay in compliance," explained Mary Uhl, of the New Mexico Air Quality Bureau.

The June 11 reading registered 70 ppb and officially put San Juan County over the edge. The violation will require the most substantial cuts in ozone-forming pollution ever in the Four Corners region. Action will likely be taken against the Four Corners Power Plant and San Juan Generating Station, in addition to the region's oil and gas wells, natural gas processing plants, and oil refineries.

"The Four Corners Region is in the midst of a health crisis," said Mike Eisenfeld, of the San Juan Citizens Alliance. "Ozone air pollution is adversely affecting children and families in San Juan County and the surrounding region. We need relief."

Opponents of the Desert Rock Power Plant added that the violation should challenge the future of the proposed coal-burning facility. They cited the EPA's assertion that the proposed power plant would not contribute to a violation of ozone health standards, a point that is now moot.

"While this violation is a wake-up call, it's also an opportunity to develop a strong, lasting clean-up plan," said Jeremy Nichols, of Rocky Mountain Clean Air Action. "We need to cut smog-forming pollution more than ever to keep us safe and healthy. We need to start by denying the permit for the Desert Rock Power Plant."

However, Desert Rock is proposed on Navajo land, and the plant can only be regulated by the Navajo Nation EPA.

"We have jurisdiction to control the power plant and oil and gas emissions only in New Mexico," Uhl said. "We don't have control over Colorado or the Navajo Nation. We'll have to work with those entities to bring the area into compliance."

Habitat for Humanity goes green

One of Durango's grassroots nonprofits is taking a sustainable approach to affordable housing. This week, Habitat for Humanity was awarded Green Communities Certification and grant funding for eight affordable housing units under development at Fox Farm Village in Bayfield. The grant will offset the construction costs of implementing Green Communities standards, including energy efficient measures.

Fox Farm Village is a 48-unit affordable housing subdivision in downtown Bayfield. The nonprofit Colorado Development Corp. acquired land for the development and conveyed clusters of lots to other nonprofit developers, including Habitat for Humanity, Colorado Housing, Inc., and Housing Solutions of the Southwest. Twenty-two homes are scheduled for completion by the end of 2008, with homeowners already selected for most of these units.

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Green Communities is the first national green-building program created for affordable housing. The program provides planning and construction guidelines to encourage healthy homes and neighborhoods, even when budgets are tight. The green standards serve a double mission and also cut costs for future homeowners.

The Regional Housing Alliance is partnering in the effort. "Our objective was to make these houses as affordable as possible for the homeowners by making them as energy efficient, healthy and durable as possible," said Ophelia Wilkins, of the RHA.

RHA staff worked with project consultants to integrate features such as passive solar gain, radon mitigation, water-permeable site paving and raised garden bed retaining walls. They also worked within the Habitat for Humanity model of in-kind donations to secure discounts on healthy materials from local suppliers such as the Eco Home Center and the Tile and Carpet Store.

"Our community is really moving forward in promoting more sustainable living and building practices. This grant will allow us to do what we could not otherwise afford to do," said Nadine Chaney-Orantes, interim director of Habitat.

The RHA and Habitat for Humanity have been collaborating on Fox Farm since December 2007. The project is expected to see its first homeowners move in by autumn 2008.

Durango library calls for public art

A call for public art went out recently. The City of Durango's Public Art Commission has put out requests for public artwork for Durango's new library and invited Four Corners artists to submit proposals for two original three-dimensional works of art.

One of the calls is for a storyteller's chair to be placed in the Storytime Room. This project will result in a functional sculpture, on which an individual will sit while telling a story to children. The budget for this project is \$15,000.

A second call is for a stairwell sculpture that will be either suspended or mounted as a wall relief in the main stairwell between the first and second floors. The budget for this project is \$20,000. The deadline for submissions for both projects is June 30.

"We look forward to many creative submissions that will reflect the character of the beautiful new library," commented Carol Martin, Chair of the Public Art Commission.

An open house is tentatively scheduled for Aug. 11, where the community will be invited to view the artist submissions for both projects. Final selection is expected Aug. 19.

"We are very excited about the prospect of incorporating public artwork in our new library," remarked Sherry Taber, library director. "We hope to have these pieces installed before the library's official opening in December."

For more information or to obtain a copy of the call to artists, please go to the City's website at www.durangogov.org or call the City Manager's Office at 375-5005.

Local photographer takes top honors

A Durango photographer recently garnered international recognition. Longtime Durango resident and internationally acclaimed nature photographer Robert Winslow took first place in the wildlife division of "The Magical Adventures Photo Contest," hosted by Outdoor Photographer Magazine and the Kenya Tourist Board. Winslow's piece was among 4,000 submissions for the contest.

"The images we received were extraordinary," said Christopher Robinson, Editor of Outdoor Photographer. "In each category, we received a number of inspiring photographs. Having so many high-caliber images made judging a challenge, as it was difficult to eliminate many photographs. The bar has been raised yet again."

Winslow captured his winning image in Amboseli National Park while leading a photo tour in Kenya last fall. The photograph, titled "Going Home," shows a long line of wildebeests at sunset.

Since moving to Durango in 1981, Robert has been a full-time freelance photographer. His work has appeared in/on many books, magazines, gift items and calendars.

– Will Sands

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