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In Pinedale, Wyo., Residents Adjust to Air Pollution

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

PINEDALE, Wyo. — Strong sun, not too much wind, a good thick snow pack: sounds like a perfect late winter's day in a remote rural Western valley rimmed by snaggle-topped mountains.

But that has also been the stage set for the worst ozone pollution event here in three years — in one of the places people might least expect. The nearest metropolis, Salt Lake City, is 180 miles away, and the usual smog suspects — cars, trucks, factories, indeed people in general — are few and far between in a county of only 8,800 residents.

State environmental officials declared another ozone alert here on Wednesday, the second in less than a week, anticipating that air pollution would settle in starting Thursday.

“It’s like a pot, with all the mountain ranges around it, and the inversion is like a lid,” said Keith Guille, a spokesman for the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, describing the conditions for cooking pollutants and creating the atmospheric inversion that locks them in place.

The upper Green River basin in southwest Wyoming has polluted-air days for a combination of reasons: its geography, in a valley at 7,000 feet; its typical winter weather that produces sun on highly reflective snow; and its economy, heavily based on [natural gas](#) drilling, which scientists say produces smog’s underlying chemical base.

“If poor air quality is what I have to live with, then that’s a choice I make,” said Dawn Mitchell, 43, a day care teacher who said she thought ozone or other pollutants here were not a particularly big deal, weighed against the benefits of an empty Western playground in one’s backyard. “I can’t imagine living anywhere else,” she said.

How the factors come together to create, in this region, a problem more commonly associated with car-choked big cities — and how much each factor is to blame for the sometimes unsavory air — is where the human element jumps into the fray.

Some people here in Pinedale, the valley's largest community — about 1,400 people, according to the welcome sign on the edge of town — say that winds blowing bad air up from places like Salt Lake are a bigger factor than the drill rigs that dot the nearby high plateaus.

Others say population growth caused by the gas boom is a contributing factor — more people making pollution with trucks and snowmobiles. Still others say energy production is the lifeblood that has made this place survive and thrive when many other Western towns are moldering, so love it or leave it.

“It's our livelihood,” said Jennifer Woolf, who can see a gas well about 300 yards from her house.

At the Pinedale Medical Clinic, a big new building of wood beams and tile, built with energy taxes, the director, Dr. James H. Quirk Jr., is not sure whether or how health and drill rigs intersect. The population is too small for a valid scientific study, he said, so it comes down to the personal and the anecdotal. “I got the flu last week,” Dr. Quirk said. “And when I was out feeding my horses, throwing hay, I was doubled over coughing” and wondering, “do I feel this miserable because of just the flu?”

Energy companies say they have taken steps to reduce emissions that can contribute to ozone formation. Encana Oil and Gas, for example, which operates 1,200 wells south of Pinedale, has converted its rigs from diesel to natural gas and consolidated production facilities to reduce evaporation, said a company spokesman, Doug Hock.

But the industry's overall well count, Mr. Hock said, has continued to rise even as those changes were put into place over the last four or five years.

Some people have called for the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to answer questions about how gas drilling might be contributing to air pollution. But the agency recently removed the topic from those it is considering for a national study of hydrofracking, a relatively new high-volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing method used in gas drilling in Wyoming and elsewhere.

Some residents said they thought ozone alerts and talk of pollution were part of an environmentalist plot to take down the [oil](#) and gas industry.

“It's the [Greenpeace](#) people who don't like it,” said Teren Donley, 25, whose husband is a supervisor for a pump truck in the gas fields south of town.

Others said they had lived elsewhere and seen smog — real smog, California style — the kind that makes Pinedale's worst day look pristine.

“Pasadena in the 1950s,” said Rod Rozier, 89, a retired pilot, talking about his standard of air pollution. Mr. Rozier moved here about three years ago to be near family and was bowling in a Wii league at the Rendezvous Point Senior Center. The center, as a plaque at the entrance proclaims, was built with the help of a natural gas company, the [Questar Corporation](#).

But in large or small ways, residents say they adjust to bad air days as they come.

“Last year we had some bad spells and my eyes hurt, like I had a sunburn,” said Vivian Watts, a waitress at Stockman’s Restaurant, a wood- and antler-lined place on Pinedale’s main drag. “This time, I’ve stayed inside.”