

Doctors: Air-quality catastrophe looms for Utah

By Judy Fahys

The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Launched:03/31/2007 12:26:27 AM MDT

Utah's pollution problem has reached crisis levels, according to a group of local physicians. On Monday, they plan to present a list of steps the state can follow to keep the air breathable and to protect the health of all Utahns. One doctor gave a sneak peek Friday of the group's warning to policymakers.

Here is the philosophy behind the doctors' effort: "We believe clean air is an inherent right for all Utah citizens and that the atmosphere belongs to all of us. All industries, elected officials, and individual citizens share a stewardship that compels us all to protect this most precious of natural resources. We do not tolerate dangerously contaminated food in our state, nor do we tolerate dangerously contaminated water. We must no longer tolerate dangerously contaminated air."

The warning is blunt.

Air pollution has reached a crisis level in northern Utah, a local doctors group says, and elected leaders must do more to head off a full-blown catastrophe.

The newly formed Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment met privately Friday with Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. to discuss its concerns. After telling the governor that air pollution damages health, much the same way as smoking does, the group recommended specific policies to address the problem.

"When people realize the air they are breathing is killing them and their children," said Brian Moench, a Salt Lake City anesthesiologist who began organizing the group last winter, "then maybe they will sit up and pay attention."

Moench's group plans a news conference Monday to detail its findings about the magnitude of the health problems facing Utahns because of the pollution, as well as why "Band-Aids" won't do much to clean up the air. In their Friday meeting with Huntsman, doctors noted that Huntsman was struck in particular by the trouble children face because of air pollution.

"Every child is affected, whether they have asthma or not," said Salt Lake City pediatrician Shellie Ring, past president of the American Lung Association in Utah. She explained that, compared with children who are not exposed to air pollution, those who are never attain their full lung function.

The doctors group is raising the alarm after a winter pollution season when the northern Utah communities from Provo to Logan had severe episodes of fine-particle pollution. For a few days this month, pollution levels were worse in Salt Lake City and Logan than in any other U.S. cities.

Meanwhile, lawmakers this year decided to maintain the state's current funding for environmental programs, even as they doled out hearty increases to other agencies from a \$1.7 billion budget surplus.

Kathy Van Dame, director of the Wasatch Clean Air Coalition and member of the state Air Quality Board, welcomed the doctors' efforts.

She said much of Utah's past regulatory focus has been on meeting federal air-pollution limits, not the health effects. Meanwhile, more and more studies suggest "we're the frogs sitting in the water and the water's getting hotter."

"These guys [the doctors] have the ability to raise the issue above business-as-usual," she said. "They bring credibility to the issue. And they are passionate."

Utah researchers have made some important strides in advancing understanding about the health effects of air pollution.

Brigham Young University's Arden Pope participated in a landmark study that showed increases in PM2.5, the microscopic soot that plagues northern Utahns during wintertime inversions. That translates into an increased risk of illness and even death from heart and lung ailments. Those findings wound up being part of a U.S. Supreme Court case that allowed federal standards for PM2.5 to go forward after a decade of controversy.

And a 12-year, 12,000-patient study Pope conducted with doctors at LDS hospital showed people suffer more heart attacks and other coronary events when winter pollution increases even for just a day or two. Also this winter, a University of Southern California study of thousands of children concluded that growing up near a freeway significantly increases the risk of serious lung and heart diseases later in life.

Rick Spratt, director of the Utah Air Quality Division, attended the meeting with Huntsman on Friday and called the doctors group "pretty well informed." He said he invited the doctors to speak to the Air Quality Board about their recommendations.

"People listen to physicians," he said. "They have a lot of credibility with the public and with patients."