

# Perspectives

## WNC fogged up with emissions problems



### An environmental viewpoint

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Environmental Columnist

Most people living in Asheville are probably aware that the quality of the air we breathe here is sickeningly bad.

In 1999, N.C. as a whole had the third-highest number of violations of health standards for ozone pollution, second only to Calif. and Texas.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park has been disgraced with the title of the most polluted National Park due to the emissions of power plants and automobiles.

State regulators attribute 40 percent of N.C.'s smog to the power plants owned by Duke Power and Carolina Power and Light. N.C. is home to 14 coal-fired power plants, which each pollute up to 10 times as much as is allowed by the Clean Air Act.

These plants, along with those of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), were exempted from the standards set by the act in 1970 by a loophole in the legislation that assumed that power plants built before 1960 were going to be retrofitted soon anyway.

Not so. Instead of adopting cleaner sources of fuel or making the plants emit less pollution, the same old inefficient coal-fired plants compete for customers at the same level as newer, cleaner plants.

As a result, there is no incentive to change their unhealthy, EPA-limit-

exceeding ways, and so coal mining, acid rain and low-level ozone are raping mountains and killing the forests of Appalachia and, ultimately, the entire east coast as the wind blows eastward, up along the Appalachian spine.

In fact, power production at older coal fired power plants that are exempt from the Clean Air Act increased 15.8 percent from 1982 to 1998.

N.C.'s citizens should not be subject to this pollution just because power companies have more time, power and money to influence politics.

This year, the Environmental Management Commission (EMC) will be setting up new rules for Nitrogen Oxide emissions from power plants.

Nitrogen Oxides (when combined with hydro-carbons, or particulates) are responsible for the dangerous levels of ground level ozone and smog this region has been increasingly experiencing.

Ozone is invisible, odorless gas made of 3 Oxygen atoms which occur naturally way above the atmosphere and protect us from UV rays, but down here at ground level, they decrease lung function by scarring the tissue, and also contribute to haze and nitrification of soils and water.

Studies by renowned air quality

scientists show that that, in order to even begin to reverse the effects of NOx, we must reduce their emissions by 80 percent. Anything less is not a solution. It is a waste of time.

Yet 2 of the 3 reduction proposals are exactly that - high enough to be difficult to implement, but not high enough to get results. Governor Hunt proposes a 68 percent reduction in NOx emissions, while the Power Companies propose a 62 percent reduction, but only the N.C. Clean Air Coalition (comprised of grassroots environmental organizations from all over N.C.) proposes an 80 percent reduction.

This summer there was a forum held here at UNCA, which the Clean Air Coalition advertised as the "NOxcuses" hearing, in which each of the proposals were introduced to the EMC and citizens were allowed time to stand up and make comments. Lipinsky Auditorium was packed and overflowing with citizens in overwhelming support of the 80 percent reduction.

The electric power industry, one of the most polluting industries in the world (coal emits 29 percent more carbon per unit of energy than oil and 80 percent more than natural gas) continues to lobby for lower standards, while smog, acid rain, global warming and mercury contamination plague the planet and contribute to asthma, cancer, neurological damage and premature death.

Here in Western North Carolina, we know that we are experiencing more air pollution from the TVA than from the dirty power plants of N.C. by looking at the pattern of Western-slope tree death, like Mount Mitchell.

TVA has the largest group of coal-burning power plants in the country, second only to a gargantuan

cluster of plants in Texas, which only produces 60 percent of the electricity that TVA does.

TVA also uses hydroelectric and nuclear power, and, in addition, has a plant called Y-12 where nuclear weapons are manufactured and assembled.

Because of wind patterns, we would be the first to experience the ill effects of any kind of accident over there.

Here in Asheville, we live in a bowl surrounded by mountains, and so we must deal with thermal inversions. This is when the emissions produced here in the heat during the middle of a summer day are trapped in the valley without circulation, because of the downward pressure from the cooler higher atmosphere.

Only after the sun goes down and the cool air slides down the mountains does the ozone danger dissipate.

Last year, the air was only healthy one in four days during the ozone season. The ozone season directly corresponds to the tourist season.

This indicates not only the hotter days but the increase of NOx and particulate-spewing traffic driving through our region.

The number of miles driven by the average American has risen 150 percent since 1970. Not only are people driving more, they are also driving more polluting and gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles (SUVs), minivans and pickup trucks.

An increasingly large percentage of large pickups are diesel-fueled. The average SUV is allowed to emit three times the amount of smog-forming pollution as the typical passenger car.

The EPA's new Tier Two Standards are trying to do something to lower that, but they are also cur-

rently in the midst of law suits with various trucking and manufacturing interests.

At least N.C. finally dropped the lawsuit against EPA for their "unreasonably high" standards.

The lion's share of the NOx produced by vehicles (non-point sources) is contributed by diesel engines, most of which are the big trucks and trains we use as our primary means of transporting freight in the U.S. Also, non-road diesel engines such as bulldozers, construction equipment and tractors are considerable sources of NOx pollution, contributing as much as on-road sources.

Automakers are allegedly discussing increased use of diesel engines in popular sport utility vehicles. Diesel engines are beginning to rival coal-fired power plants in being the largest source of NOx emissions.

At the hearing this summer, the Duke Power dude said in his spiel that we must remember that vehicles are also a large contributor to

air pollution.

I was the only one in the auditorium who clapped and cheered, holding my bike helmet up as a suggestion. Yes, he was certainly trying to imply that the yucky power plants should be less accountable, which is not the case, but his point is still a good one, albeit not one that any car owner wants to hear.

No one wants to hear that they are part of the problem, but if we are going to reduce this town's emissions and clean up our air, it's going to take all of us.

So, my proposal to you all — students, faculty and staff alike — is please bike, carpool and take the bus. Please don't own a stupid SUV.

Please only drive when you need to, and drive a fuel-efficient car with a catalytic converter. Use less electricity at home. Get compact fluorescents and turn your air conditioning down. You will feel better and breathe easier when you go hiking, and perhaps you will even be able to see the view when you get to the top.

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