U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
Blog Round-up
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ROUND-UP OF MAJOR BLOGS

AIR

EPA tightens sulfur dioxide limits (*Huffington Post*)

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WASHINGTON — Good news for asthmatics, children, the elderly and those who have breathing disorders.

For the first time in nearly 40 years, the Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday issued standards that lower the acceptable levels of sulfur dioxide emissions and increase the intervals the gas is monitored.

Under the new rules, sulfur dioxide levels will be cut nearly in half from the current 140 parts per billion averaged over 24 hours to 75 parts per billion measured hourly.

The new rules, which go into effect 60 days after publication in the Federal Register, are designed to protect against short-term exposure to sulfur dioxide, produced when power plants or other industrial facilities burn coal as an energy source. The states will have to submit implementation plans by June 2011, and the first areas that won't meet the standard identified the following year.

The EPA estimates that the rule change will result in $13 billion to $33 billion annually in health cost savings and prevent 2,300 to 5,900 premature deaths and 54,000 asthma attacks a year. The estimated cost in 2020 to fully implement this standard is $1.5 billion.

Wednesday's final rule also changes the air quality index to reflect the revised sulfur dioxide standard.

BP SPILL

June 4, 2010

Wash Off Tarballs, But Brief Encounters Not Risky (*Huffington Post*)

MIKE STOBBE | 06/ 3/10 06:24 PM |
ATLANTA — Oil has now washed up on the beaches of three Gulf states. How dangerous is it? Not very, experts say.

People should of course stay away from oil on the beach or in the water, but swallowing a little oil-tainted water or getting slimed by a tarball is not considered grounds for a trip to the emergency room, health officials say.

"Limited contact is not something that needs to be treated by a physician," said Doc Kokol, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Health.

It's been six weeks since the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, killing 11 workers and pouring an estimated 21 million to 45 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Oil has hit beaches in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. And it lurks off the coast of the Florida Panhandle.

Poison control centers have had about 45 calls from people saying they think they got sick from oil spill exposure.

It helps that the spill involves a type of oil called medium sweet crude. It's considered less hazardous than other forms because it contains fewer toxic sulfur compounds and fewer chemicals that enter the air easily, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But oil is considered toxic. Short exposures may cause only fleeting symptoms. But exposure to large amounts of it day after day for a long time could lead to problems with breathing, thinking and coordination, and potentially raise the risk of cancer, said Niladri Basu, a University of Michigan environmental toxicologist.

"Avoidance is the best medicine," he said.

Children are more sensitive to pollution than adults, and parents should watch for rashes on their skin or dark sticky spots that are hard to wash off, the CDC says.

Long-lasting skin contact with crude oil can cause skin to redden, swell and burn. The problem can get worse if the skin is exposed to the sun.

Oil on bare skin should be washed off as soon as possible. Call the local poison control center if a rash or other problem develops, health officials advise.

Soap and water, baby oil or petroleum jelly are the best way to remove it. Avoid using kerosene or gasoline. If you get oil in your eyes, rinse them with water for 15 minutes, the CDC says.

Swallowing small amounts of oil – less than a coffee cup – can cause vomiting and diarrhea, but is not likely to have long-lasting effects, government doctors say.

For years bits of tar have shown up on some beaches along the Gulf because of tanker and rig spills and oil seepage from beneath the sea that washes up. Some condominiums, especially in Texas, keep handy tar-remover towelettes for visitors.

The oil spill in the Gulf began washing ashore in Mobile Bay, Alabama, Thursday. At a Confederate fort on the white sand beach, reddish-brown globs appeared. Faith Kaiser and Bertice McPherson had brought rubber gloves and plastic bags to take a look and help clean up.

"It was just sickening to see this coming. We wanted to see it one more time before it was destroyed," said McPherson, of Mobile.

At least 11 oil spill response workers reportedly have become sick in the past week, suffering flu-like symptoms after patrolling the waters off Gulf Coast beaches.

But response workers – who are trained and generally have safety equipment – are near higher concentrations of oil, chemical dispersants and other substances. The risk to the landbound public is considered much smaller, health officials say.

Neither the CDC nor the Environmental Protection Agency have set up tracking systems for oil spill-related illnesses. States have, but they don't all track cases the same way, officials said.

WATER

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Daley To Feds On Chicago River Cleanup: 'Go Swim In The Potomac' (*Huffington Post*)

First Posted: 06- 2-10 03:52 PM | Updated: 06- 2-10 05:02 PM
In his typically blunt style, Mayor

Richard M. Daley replied Wednesday afternoon to a letter from the Environmental Protection Agency, urging that his city's Chicago River be made clean enough to swim in.

"The federal government should look out their window at the Potomac and figure out what the Potomac is all about," the mayor said, according to the Chicago Sun-Times.

And then, in true Daley form, "Go swim in the Potomac."

The mayor was responding to a recommendation from the EPA and the Obama administration, quietly filed with a state rule-making panel and uncovered by the Chicago Tribune yesterday.

For decades, the river was a channel of sludge directed away from Lake Michigan, designed to separate the city's drinking water from its waste. But the elder Mayor Daley, father of the current mayor, had a vision for the river: that Chicagoans would fish and play in it.

Then, it seemed like a pipe dream. But thirty years of improvements have made the lake fishable, and kayakers can be seen cruising up and down along the channel.

The Obama administration's recommendations would hold the river to even higher standards of cleanliness. But Daley's outrage over the recommendation stems in part from the government's refusal to fund Chicago river cleanup projects to date.

From the Sun-Times:

Daley said it's hypocritical for the federal government to hand down an edict when it has failed to fund the Deep Tunnel project desperately needed to prevent raw sewage from being dumped in the Chicago River after heavy rains.
"We asked the federal government to fund it, but they kept cutting it back year after year. That is one of the major issues. When you have flooding, you need deep tunnels to take care of that water," he said.

The mayor's famous mouth has been in fine form recently. When asked by a reporter two weeks ago if the city's gun ban had been effective, he responded by threatening to put a gun "up your butt" and fire a round there.

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June 4, 2010

Ohio Coal Plant Linked to $30m in Annual Economic Damage (*Grist*)

This post was co-written by Nachy Kanfer, Associate Field Organizer for the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign in Ohio.

We regularly dispute Big Coal when they say coal is not bad for the environment - now we have another example of how this dirty, outdated power source is costing jobs and damaging the economy in one state.

The Sierra Club just co-released a report showing that the Bay Shore coal-fired power plant in Oregon, Ohio, causes nearly $30 million in damages to the state's economy every year.

The report, produced by Genter Consulting and co-released by the Western Lake Erie Waterkeeper Association, Ohio Citizen Action, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Ohio

Environmental Council, the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association, and the Ohio Division of the Izaak Walton League of America, shows that this massive economic damage is caused by the plant's antiquated cooling system.

The Bay Shore facility lacks cooling towers, which means that every day it has to draw over 650 million gallons of fresh water. In the summertime, that requires the plant to suck in the entire Maumee River! The water is then spit back into Lake Erie, 5-12 degrees Fahrenheit warmer, and with 126,000 fewer fish every day. This destroys fish populations in Lake Erie that would otherwise be used by Ohioans for recreation or commercial sale.

The conservative $29.7 million estimate was for damage to fish only, and did not include estimates of damage from other uses such as hunting or bird-watching, both of which contribute to the state's economy as well. The study used FirstEnergy's (operator of the Bay Shore plant) own numbers for how many fish are killed.

The report methodically demonstrates a central necessity: the installation of cooling towers at the Bay Shore plant, which would reduce fish kills by 95 percent.

"We now know that the estimated $100 million cost of installing cooling towers is economically justified by the annual $29.7 million economic loss from the fish kills," said Sandy Bihn, a member of the Oregon City Council and Executive Director of the Western Lake Erie Waterkeeper Association.

"Ohio's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) needs to require Bay Shore to install cooling towers to reduce the millions of fish - and billions of larval fish - killed each year."

This report also comes as the Ohio EPA reviews its draft of a wastewater discharge renewal permit for the Bay Shore facility - which we are urging them to reject.

Commercial fishermen, sport anglers, and recreational boaters in the Toledo area are taking the lead on this issue, saying the coal plant's destruction of fish populations for cooling purposes robs them of their livelihoods.

"I have lived and worked within one half mile of the Bay Shore plant starting 17 years before it was built in 1951, and ever since," said Frank Reynolds, a local resident and commercial fisherman. "The Bay Shore power plant has killed fish and degraded the Maumee Bay waters, spawning grounds, nursery and general food supply."

Ultimately, of course, the best way to preserve the livelihoods of those who rely on fishing in Lake Erie - and the best way to clean the lake and strengthen the economy of northwest Ohio - is to stop burning coal at the Bay Shore plant.

It's not just a problem of fish - though that would be bad enough. The Bay Shore plant, along with three other FirstEnergy-owned plants along the shore of Lake Erie, is also under a Notice of Violation from the United States Environmental Protection Agency for alleged violations of the

Clean Air Act. Bay Shore has no modern pollution controls and contributes to Ohio's chronic conditions of poor air quality, through heavy emissions of dangerous soot, smog and mercury.

Coal has no place in Ohio's energy future. In recent weeks, as the BP oil disaster unfolds off the Gulf Coast, we have all felt a keen sense of solidarity with those whose livelihoods - and lives - have been ruined by our nation's addiction to oil. The problem, in a nutshell, is dirty energy. Whether it's oil on the Gulf Coast or coal in Ohio, we have learned that dirty energy is simply incompatible with clean water, our nation's crucial fishing and tourism industries, and a strong, robust economy.

BONUS NEWS: We'll end with some good news that just came down from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Today EPA announced a new strong standard for sulfur dioxide, one of the major pollutants that burning coal spews forth into our air. This new EPA standard will reduce acid rain, soot and smog pollution.