

Regional Haze: It's Time to Clear the Air

Montana Environmental Information Center
National Parks Conservation Association
Park County Environmental Council
Sierra Club



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What does "regional haze" mean?



These images from the National Park Service show Glacier Park's Lake McDonald through increasing amounts of haze.



Montanans are familiar with hazy air. Far too often, our summers are ruined by smoke-filled skies that drive people indoors and to emergency rooms. Winter inversions in many of our valleys can create some of the most dangerous levels of air pollution all year. We can't immediately prevent winter inversions or mega-forest fires – other than reverse course on the climate crisis – so when there is an opportunity to limit harmful pollution that worsens haze pollution, we should eagerly embrace it.

Every 10 years, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) must propose a plan to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to reduce air pollution and the resulting haze from the state's largest industrial polluters. It's a golden opportunity to clean up Montana's air and protect important public resources.

The federal Clean Air Act requires the EPA and states to decrease haze pollution that impacts national parks and wilderness areas so that visitors can appreciate these shared national treasures. Reducing air pollution that causes haze also reduces harmful air pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, and more.

Kicking the Can Down the Road

Unfortunately, DEQ is already years behind schedule for the 2018 planning cycle and is proposing to require exactly nothing of major industrial pollution sources for this cycle at all. Instead, it claims that it will revisit the issue in the next planning cycle beginning in 2028. This means it would require no actual industry improvements until sometime after it develops the 2028 plan, if that plan is even implemented on time. DEQ is proposing to let people keep breathing nearly 30,000 tons of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides for at least 10 more years.

Here are some of the industrial polluters that DEQ proposes to wait until 2028 to start addressing:

- Colstrip Power Plant
- Yellowstone Energy Limited Partnership near Billings (a power plant that burns waste petroleum)
- Colstrip Energy Limited Partnership near Colstrip (a power plant that burns waste coal)
- Ash Grove Cement Plant near Helena
- GCC Trident Cement Plant near Three Forks
- ExxonMobile Refinery near Billings
- Phillips 66 Refinery in Billings
- CHS Refinery in Laurel

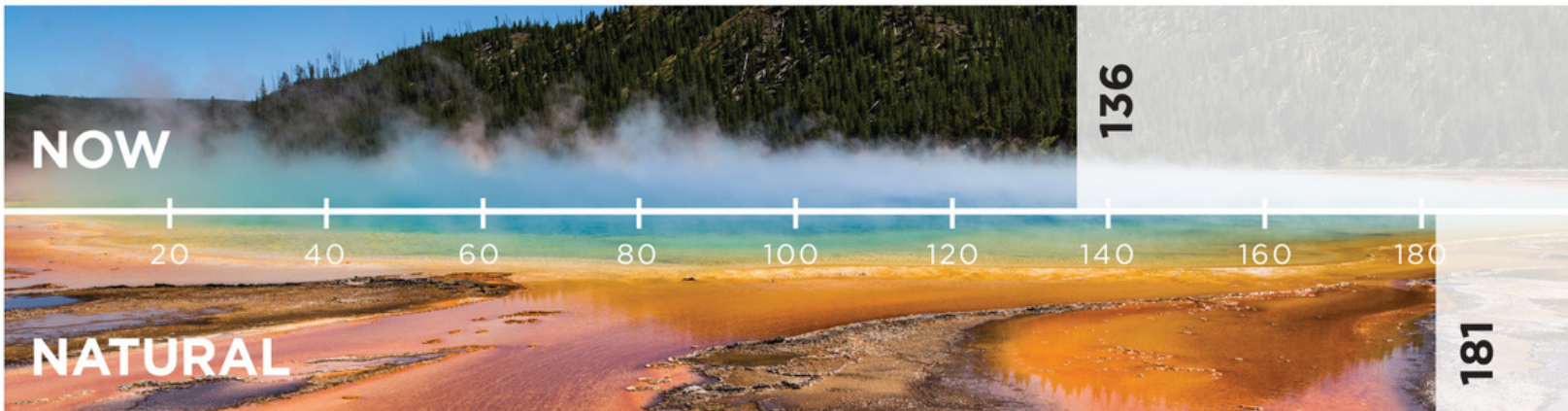
Other states, such as Texas and Colorado, have established a dollar threshold for determining what constitutes cost-effective pollution controls. This means that many of the pollution control measures that DEQ discarded would be acceptable to other states because they're cost-effective. However, Montana DEQ has decided that there is no such thing as a cost-effective measure, meaning no facilities need to install emissions controls to decrease their pollution.

The pollutants at issue for the regional haze program are harmful to public health, especially communities living near the sources such as the people of the Northern Cheyenne and Crow Agency, Billings, Helena, and Bozeman. The National Parks Conservation Association found that the electricity sector accounts for 72% of Montana's haze-forming emissions. These same facilities are fueling the climate crisis, pouring greenhouse gasses into the air, making wildfires even more devastating to health, and causing drought.

What Needs to Be Done?

Average Visibility in Miles

Yellowstone National Park



DEQ needs to implement the following immediately:

- Require pollution controls at Montana's refineries, coal-fired power plants, and cement kilns.
- Establish a cost-effective monetary threshold for each ton of pollution reduction that is at least as strong as Colorado's threshold of \$10,000 per ton of pollution.
- Analyze potential emissions reductions for the Hardin Generation Station and determine whether this recently revived cryptocurrency-mining coal plant can reduce air pollution.
- Stop using inflated costs for pollution control measures, making those protective controls seem uneconomic when they are not.

What Can I Do?

Make your voice heard on DEQ's empty plan to clear the air.

DEQ is hosting a public hearing on March 18, 2022 at 1:30-3:00 p.m.

Attend in person at:

Lee Metcalf Building, Room 40
1520 E. 6th Avenue
Helena, MT

Join online through DEQ's TEAMS meeting:
<https://tinyurl.com/23s2j7hv>

Or join by phone: 406-318-5487; Conference ID:
687 809 787

Submit public comment until March 21, 2022.
Send written comments by mail or email to:

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