

NewsRoom

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Section: Domestic News

Mounting Problems in New Pollution Belt Threaten Image, **Environment** An AP Extra

SCOTT MCCARTNEY

PHOENIX, Ariz.

Like many before then, Janice and Dennis Hall packed their lives into a U- Haul and, on doctors' advice, headed from Ohio to the desert Southwest seeking clean air and a fresh start for their asthmatic son.

But when the Halls topped the mountains that surround Phoenix, they saw a yellow-brown cloud of pollutants hanging over the city they had thought was pure.

"It was devastating," Mrs. Hall recalled. "My husband didn't even have a job and I thought, 'This is what we've come to? Look at this place.'"

Smog is something Los Angeles and Northern industrial cities have long battled. Now, after decades of lax regulation and unbridled growth, many sunbelt cities are waking to the noxious hangover of pollution.

Phoenix now has the worst carbon monoxide pollution in the nation, according to the **Environmental** Protection Agency. In the winter, the "Valley of the Sun" often lies beneath the ugly shadow of desert dust, engine exhaust, ozone and other harmful pollutants.

"We still have people moving to this area believing it is a better area (**environmentally**). It's the Southwest, wide open space, and they assume it's got to be a healthy place to live. That is not the case," said Jay Schied, president of the Arizona Lung Association in Phoenix.

Other areas along the nations southwestern tier, places as diverse as Arizona's tranquil desert and **Louisiana's** murky bayous, are also grappling with pollution troubles - smelters, waste pits, sewage systems, toxic dumps, wood smoke and clogged freeways.

Those public sores and blemishes not only threaten the **environment**, experts say, but also undermine selling points such as the region's image of robust health and its relaxed low-regulation, pro-business attitude.

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"There are now types of pollution in all the major Western cities," said you get several hundred thousand people together doing their things."

The problems in the nation's new pollution belt are as varied as the geography:

- In Arizona, carbon monoxide in excess of federal standards has brought a threat to cut \$500 million in highway funds. This spring the state approved a tougher auto emissions testing program. But a copper smelter with no pollution control equipment spews tons of sulphur dioxide into the desert. To close the plant would cost jobs.

- In New Mexico, the EPA has withheld \$320,000 in anti-pollution funds because of Albuquerque's poor air quality. The city has resisted federal pressure for an auto emissions program.

- In Texas, rapid urban growth has stretched sewage treatment plants beyond capacity. Raw sewage is sometimes dumped into rivers; fires are sometimes assessed.

- In Oklahoma and Arkansas, authorities are struggling to clean up chemical waste sites, some of which have been leaking for years.

- And in **Louisiana**, decades of unregulated oil and chemical industry activities have left hundreds of hazardous waste sites and numerous polluting plants. The sites, state officials say, are threatening the groundwater, but their expensive cleanups must wait because of a state budget crisis.

"I don't think we've even seen the tip of the iceberg on **environmental** cleanup in **Louisiana**," said Patricia Norton, secretary of the **Louisiana** Department of **Environmental** Quality. "I don't think it's too late yet, but in a few more years, we'll be past the point of no return."

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It was the reputation for clean air that drew the Halls, and thousands before them, to Phoenix. But the explosive growth of the last 15 years, coupled with inadequate highway and mass transit systems, has tainted the city's air.

Phoenix has carbon monoxide, dust and ozone pollution that's often more than double the healthy level established under 1977 amendments to the 1970 Clean Air Act, officials said. EPA data show Phoenix has the nation's most carbon monoxide violations, with Los Angeles and Denver ranked second and third, said Imants Krese, the EPA district program manager in San Francisco.

Carbon monoxide comes primarily from vehicle exhausts and can threaten people who have heart disease by inhibiting the blood's ability to carry oxygen. The EPA allows cities only one violation per year; in 1984, one "hot spot" monitor located near a busy Phoenix intersection peaked above the federal standard 119 times.

"It's fair to characterize it as a problem that's growing right now (in Phoenix)," said Krese. "Without quibbling over details, it's definitely one of the worst carbon monoxide problems in the nation."

State and local officials disagree with the EPA, contending that the "hot spot" data skews the situation and, if ignored, Phoenix would rank about third.

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Besides hiding mountain vistas, particulates such as the naturally occurring desert dust exceeded EPA standards in Phoenix about half the time over the last 10 years, the highest percentage in the country, said Bob Evans, chief of the Air Pollution Control Division of the county health department.

The dust problem has been exacerbated by the furious pace of construction, as heavy trucks and earth movers churn dirt into the air from unpaved roads and building sites.

Spores carried in the pollution can cause a fungus disease called coccidiomycosis, or "valley fever." In its mild stage, valley fever has the same symptoms as a common cold but can worsen to a pneumonia-like lung disease and, if the fungus spreads untreated, can be fatal, doctors said. The pollution can also aggravate conditions for asthma and allergy patients.

The Halls didn't know about desert dust and the severe pollution when they left Columbus, Ohio, last fall with their three children, including 6-year-old Ben, an asthmatic who was dependent on steroids.

On bad days, Mrs. Hall said, Ben must stay inside. He's shown some improvement because of the dry climate, she said, but still has difficulty breathing.

To worsen matters, Hall lost his health insurance from his \$12-an-hour Ohio job, and a new policy at his \$9-an-hour Phoenix job won't cover Ben's pre-existing condition until September.

"This was not the answer," she said. "As far as everyone back East coming here - no, no, no. The doctors said we had to get him to Phoenix, and when we got here, the doctors said we shouldn't have come."

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In Albuquerque, a 40-foot candle atop a prominent building turns red on winter days when air quality deteriorates to unhealthy levels.

The valley city is often shrouded under "the brown cloud" - a mixture of auto emissions and smoke from wood-burning fireplaces.

The cloud "is obviously an aesthetic problem and it may be a health problem," said Gordon, director of Albuquerque's **Environmental** Health and Energy Department.

While the EPA has yet to issue "brown cloud" standards, it has decided Albuquerque's carbon monoxide pollution is a health problem. The agency withheld \$320,000 in federal anti-pollution funds because of local resistance to clean-up programs and has threatened to cut off \$23 million in highway funds.

Albuquerque-area voters will decide in November whether to adopt a 2-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax to finance vehicle emissions tests. Mayor Ken Schultz has opposed a testing program, contending the city, which violated EPA carbon monoxide limits only four times last year, can meet federal standards without it.

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The land around Mary McCastle's Baton Rouge, **La.**, home was farmland for years, until 1969 when a **Rollins Environmental Services** waste dump and incinerator were built across Scenic Highway on the shores of the Mississippi River. Now the trees in her front yard are bare, and tomatoes won't grow in her garden.

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Mrs. McCastle, 70, has chronic sinus and respiratory disease that makes it difficult for her to talk. Her words came between short, raspy breaths as she described the foul-smelling black smoke that comes from the **Rollins** plant, tagged by state officials as one of the worst polluters in a region full of dirty petroleum and chemical industries.

"The **Rollins** people are suffering us out," Mrs. McCastle said. "One time, the smoke came over so bad people were gagging in church."

The plant is but one of 350 hazardous sites in **Louisiana**, according to Ms. Norton, the state's chief **environmental** officer. More than 2.3 million tons of pollutants are pumped into **Louisiana's** atmosphere each year. The lake beside the state capitol is posted with "No Fishing" signs because of pollution.

And until recently, when the Legislature took up the issue, industry operated without much **environmental** supervision, officials say.

Although **Louisiana** has about the same number of waste sites as New Jersey, the Bayou State has only six EPA Superfund clean-up projects, while New Jersey has some 100 - mostly because "**Louisiana** was not aggressive at trying to get sites put on Superfund," Ms. Norton said.

Waste in at least 100 **Louisiana** pits is slowly leaking toward groundwater sources and could eventually contaminate drinking water, Ms. Norton said. But a single cleanup can cost \$1 million.

"Groundwater is going to be the single most important **environmental** issue in the next 10 years," said Ms. Norton, whose budget has already been cut in half in the last three years. "The big problem is that just about the time we woke up, the oil crash hit and we don't have the money."

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In the barren desert of southern Arizona, not far from the Mexico border, the Phelps Dodge Corp. has operated its 82-year-old copper smelter through years of pleas and protests from environmentalists and local residents. According to EPA figures, the Phelps Dodge smelter is the West's largest producer of sulphur dioxide, pouring an average 300,000 tons into the air annually.

Like so many of the isolated, single-source pollution problems of the Sunbelt, the smelter has been subject to minimal regulation. It has repeatedly sidestepped the required pollution controls by obtaining waivers to standards from the EPA and state agencies.

But on July 9, the smelter was shut down when the EPA and the state denied further extensions. The closing may be only temporary, however. Phelps Dodge was negotiating to try to reopen the plant, EPA spokesman Terry Wilson said.

The company has said it would be cheaper to shut the plant down than clean it up, but that would cost 300 jobs.

Another isolated trouble spot is Oklahoma's Tar Creek, 40 square miles where lead and zinc were mined and where acid is now leaking into Ottawa County's aquifer. A \$4 million Superfund clean-up is under way.

Arkansas authorities must find a way to dispose of more than 20,000 barrels of hazardous waste found at a chemical plant in Jacksonville, near Little Rock, that closed earlier this year.

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And last February, heavy rains washed out a pipeline at a Dallas waste treatment plant, allowing up to 18 million gallons of untreated waste to pour into the Trinity River. It wasn't the first time. In every month but two in the last seven years, sewer discharges have exceeded federal limits.

Officials blame the strain of the city's fast-growing suburbs. A state agency fined the city of Dallas \$546,000 for a series of violations over the eight months ending in April and put in place a formula for future violations. Other Texas cities have also been fined.

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These days, as pollution problems and political awareness about them grow among all these states, **environmental** activist Paul Robinson says liberals and conservatives are finding they share "very severe concerns."

"Everyone's now an environmentalist," said Robinson, research director for the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque. "Everyone realizes what an asset to the West the **environment** is."

Jack Kenney, 68, has seen Sierra Club membership in Sante Fe, N.M., grow from 250 in 1980 to 1,200 now.

Still, he said, there's little action toward solutions. "I hate to say it," said Kenney, a member of the Sierra Club's Southwest regional board, "but I think we're going to have a Bhopal or a cancer epidemic or something like that before people wake up."

---- Index References ----

Company: PHELPS DODGE CORP

News Subject: (Economics & Trade (1EC26))

Industry: (Energy Industry **Environmental** Issues (1EN22); **Environmental** (1EN24); Hazardous Waste (1HA81); Fungal (1FU80); Internal Medicine (1IN54); Infectious Diseases (1IN99); **Environmental** Solutions (1EN90); **Environmental Services** (1EN69); **Environmental** Regulatory (1EN91); Ear, Nose & Throat (1EN56); Nature Conservation (1NA56); Healthcare (1HE06); Healthcare Practice Specialties (1HE49); Respiratory & Pulmonary (1RE29))

Region: (New Mexico (1NE26); Oklahoma (1OK58); North America (1NO39); Texas (1TE14); **Louisiana** (1LO72); California (1CA98); Americas (1AM92); New Jersey (1NE70); USA (1US73); Arizona (1AR13); Ohio (1OH35); Arkansas (1AR83))

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