

December 19, 2011
KUFM / KGPR
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Efforts to Trivialize Dangerous Air Pollution Problems in Montana

Industrial interests have launched an all-out attack on the Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to implement various elements of the Clean Air Act to reduce air pollution from older coal-fired electric generators in Montana. These industrial interests, for instance, do not want stricter control of mercury that damages the developing brains of children as well as adults, nor do they want reductions in the emissions of the tiny particulates that bury themselves deep in our lungs, bringing on a variety of respiratory disorders while shortening our lives.

Rather than confront the serious health problems caused by the pollutants coming from their older coal-fired electric generators, these industrial interests have tried to trivialize these pollution problems and exploit the current hard economic times to frighten us into accepting the pollutants that they want to be able to continue to spew into the air that we all breathe.

This effort at trivializing a serious air pollution problem has been carried out by focusing on those parts of EPA's efforts that are driven by the sections of the Clean Air Act that sought to protect National Parks and Wilderness Areas from industrial air pollution. All National Parks and Wilderness Areas were automatically assigned by the Clean Air Act a higher level of protection from air pollutants than most other areas of the nation. That is not surprising, National Parks and Wilderness areas protect unique natural treasures from the degradation that industrialization and urbanization might

otherwise bring to them. That, of course, is why we do not allow factories, feed lots, high-rise buildings, and suburban subdivisions in National Parks and Wilderness areas.

One of the national park and wilderness values that Class I air quality status was intended to protect was the natural vistas for which our national parks and wilderness areas are famous. Think of the vista looking out over the Grand Canyon of the Colorado or the vista looking out over the mountain peaks of Glacier Park from the Going to the Sun Highway. Alternatively think about the views of the Upper and Lower Falls of the Yellowstone or the majestic Grand Tetons. Air pollution from coal-fired electric generators could, as it did for a while at the Grand Canyon, seriously obscure those views. The Clean Air Act committed Americans to protecting those natural values of our parks and wilderness areas.

The opponents to finally, decades late, in Montana, implementing this long promised protection for our parks and wilderness areas dismiss this as simply “haze,” a slight and ephemeral aesthetic concern that we can easily do without and certainly is not worth sacrificing the jobs of people at power generating stations or in businesses that might not be able to afford higher cost electricity. Of course, it is disputable that any such job loss would take place or whether damaging our national parks and wilderness areas would not also have job losses associated with it. Every time a change is proposed in public policy, those who are damaging public resources raise the job-loss argument. That job-loss argument was raised when our national parks were created. It was raised when our wilderness areas were created. It was raised when the Clean Air Act was passed. It was raised when we acted to remove sulfuric acid and lead from the air we breathe. Somehow, we survived protecting unique natural landscapes in the past

and making our air and water safer for our children and ourselves. We will do it again now and live healthier, prosperous lives despite some industrialists' efforts to frighten us out of doing what is right.

Just as important, this is not just about cleaning up air pollution in our national parks. This is also about our health. The same pollutants, sulfur dioxide, tiny particulates, and nitrogen oxides that cause the scattering of light that leads to impaired visibility of natural vistas also threaten our health.

A study published in the nation's top economic journal in August of this year evaluated the economic damage done by air pollution from various sectors of our economy.¹ The sector with the highest economic loss due to air pollution was the utilities sector, with costs of \$80 billion per year.² 85 percent of those environmental damages were associated with coal-fired electric generation. The economic damages were so large that they were twice the size of the economic value created by those coal-fired generators.

The damages were almost entirely to our health, including the premature death of children and adults and chronic respiratory disease such as asthma and bronchitis at all ages. Evaluating this very real damage to our health, of course, requires assigning an economic value to lives that are shortened and lives that are made miserable by disease. The minimum cost is the expenditure on health care and medicine and the lost economic productivity. But that trivializes the loss of life and the pain and suffering. As controversial as it may be to evaluate these, putting some significant value on them is better than trivializing them by assigning them a zero value.

¹ "Environmental Accounting for Pollution in the United States Economy," Nicholas Z. Muller, et al., *American Economic Review* 101(August 2011):1649-675.

² 2000 dollars converted to 2011 dollars using the CPI.

When industrial interests try to tell us that controlling air pollution is a silly and counter-productive nanny-state fixation on hazy views, we need to emphatically dispute that characterization and point out that what controlling the air pollution from coal-fired power plants in Montana is all about is protecting those unique and special areas that our parents and grandparents set aside for all future generations and protecting the lives and health of our children and ourselves. Nothing less is at stake.