

Mono Lake supporters to the EPA: Keep our air clean!

Huge opposition to the EPA rule change

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

At the end of 2005, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) quietly proposed to abandon clean air health standards at Mono Lake. The public response has been loud and clear: Bad idea!

The EPA's revisions to the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for particulate matter (PM) have two major flaws. First, they eliminate regulation of windblown dust—just the kind that comes off the exposed bed of Mono Lake. Second, they abandon the relevant particulate regulations in rural areas across the country, including the Mono Basin.

These changes raise serious public health concerns. Not only that, the new regulations would weaken the underpinnings of the State Water Board decision that protects Mono Lake. One of the major reasons the lake is on the road to health is that the Water Board determined that the best way to get the dust storms under control was to put the major dust emitting sections of the lakebed back under water.

The Mono Lake Committee took the EPA proposal very seriously and worked feverishly to rally a major show of concern before the end of the public comment period in mid-April.

To start with, Committee staff contacted members in the Bay Area with the goal of turning out support for Mono Lake at a public hearing held in San Francisco on March 8th. Thank you to members Gordon Matassa, Anna Mills, Kelly Runyon, and Diane Vornoli who joined Co-Executive Director Frances Spivy-Weber to speak on Mono's behalf. Remarkably, the EPA staff at the hearing seemed unaware of the dust storm situations at Mono and Owens and requested further information.

Committee members also wrote comment letters to the EPA—lots of them! Response was tremendous, with over 2,801 comments submitted on Mono Lake's behalf. Once again, thank you Mono Lake Committee members—your action and commitment makes a difference!

The Committee also made sure that local organizations and officials heard about the problematic proposal and urged everyone to take action. Response was broad and unanimous. Letters, resolutions, and petitions calling on the EPA to preserve the health standards came from the Mono County Board of Supervisors, Inyo County Board of Supervisors,

Mono County Tourism Commission, Mono County Public Health Department, Mono Basin Regional Planning Advisory Committee, Town of Mammoth Lakes, Lee Vining Chamber of Commerce, the Sierra Club Range of Light Chapter, the Bristlecone Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, Friends of the Inyo, June Lake Advocates, CalTrout, the Andrea Lawrence Institute for Mountains and Rivers, Mono Basin Mothers for Clean Air, and a number of individuals, including local property owners.



Mono Lake dust storm.

And that's not all. Congressional Representative Howard "Buck" McKeon, who represents the Eastern Sierra, weighed in with a call for the EPA to "amend the proposed rule to require coarse PM controls in the Owens Valley and Mono Basin non-attainment areas, as well as in all rural communities threatened by toxic dust, regardless of the source."

California Senator Barbara Boxer submitted a very strong letter of comment, questioning the political motives behind the rules. Senator Dianne Feinstein also commented in support of clean air. The US Forest Service national comments included specific reference to the Mono Basin and Owens Valley situations.

The California Air Resources Board wrote, "Because of the serious nature of PM exposure in California and the voluminous scientific literature demonstrating a clear association between PM exposure and adverse health effects [the Board] adopted stringent standards for both PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ in 2002. We think the US Environmental Protection Agency needs to take action to establish an equally strong NAAQS for PM."

And there's more. The Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District, which oversees Mono Lake air pollution, wrote an excellent and detailed letter regarding Mono Lake and the Owens Valley. Jim Strock, the former head of California's EPA, called on the US EPA to rethink its approach.

The Los Angeles City Council weighed in as well, urging the EPA to retain the particulate standards and commenting that "the City of Los Angeles supports and concurs with concerns that have been raised about the proposed revisions ... the

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DWP Commissioners visit the Eastern Sierra

Future collaboration invited—will there be a new relationship?

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

On April 24th, a delegation of Los Angeles leaders arrived in Mammoth Lakes. Their goal: begin building a new relationship between the city—particularly the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP)—and the Eastern Sierra.

Lead by DWP Commission President Mary Nichols, the group included three of the five Commissioners, the DWP General Manager, the Los Angeles Deputy Mayor for Energy and the Environment, and many other senior DWP staff members. In the 102 years that Los Angeles and the Eastern Sierra have been intertwined by issues of water, the visit was the first time DWP Commissioners have ever made such a group effort.

The goal of the visit was to “open a dialogue” said Commissioner David Nahai. Recognizing the decades of contentious and often bitter relations between DWP and the region, Nahai added that “the trip here is to overcome a lack of trust.”

“There are real opportunities,” said Commissioner Nichols, “to build relationships between the city and the ranchers and open space and rural communities that are the Eastern Sierra.” Nichols promised to return frequently to the



DWP Commissioners listen to Tony Taylor from the Eastern Sierra Land Trust at the public meeting held on April 27.

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area. In fact, she has done so once already.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa “wants to make LA the greenest city in the country,” said Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley, “and he recognizes the unique relationship with the Eastern Sierra.”

The delegation met with Mono County leaders and citizens, including holding a public meeting focused on discussion of how DWP’s current land management policies—

which preclude development of tens of thousands of acres of Eastern Sierra land owned by the city of LA—might be transformed into a long-term, mutually beneficial commitment. Afterward, the delegation continued on to two days of meetings in Inyo County.

The Mono Lake Committee was well represented during the visit. The Committee has long sought to build a productive relationship with DWP and is pleased to see that DWP’s new leadership is looking in the same direction. One visit, of course, cannot dispel a hundred years of history. The signs are positive, and the real proof will be in the next steps. Stay tuned to see if these good intentions can translate into real, long-term projects, commitments, and dialogues. ❖

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City expects the national ambient air quality standards to be protective of public health, as mandated by the Clean Air Act.”

Last, but certainly not least, the Mono Lake Committee produced a 22-page comment letter developed by staff, attorneys, and Mono Lake dust experts. The Committee laid out detailed scientific and legal evidence in the letter. In summary, the letter:

- Argued that the EPA must recraft the NAAQS to equal or exceed current coarse particulate matter standards in the Mono Basin and Owens Valley nonattainment areas.
- Presented evidence showing that this is the only way to bring the NAAQS into accordance with the facts and the mandate of Congress.
- Demonstrated that the air quality degradation that occurs in the vicinity of Mono and Owens lakes is unarguably a threat to human health by virtue of the extreme particulate

concentrations and toxic particulate content.

- Argued that the lack of any analysis by the EPA of the Mono and Owens dust storms is a serious flaw of the NAAQS.
- Pointed out that Congress has specifically called for the Mono Basin and Owens Valley dust storms to be regulated.

What does all this add up to? Certainly a clear and consistent call for the EPA to abandon its flawed approach to revising the standards. What will the EPA actually do? That’s unknown. What we do know is that the EPA must issue the final standards in late September. If they fail to protect public health again, litigation is certain, and the Committee will be ready to represent Mono Lake’s interests in that process.

The complete Mono Lake Committee comment letter is available online at www.monolake.org or by request; contact Geoff (geoff@monolake.org) at (760) 647-6595. ❖