

Environmental Protection Agency plans to strip federal air quality protection from Mono Lake

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

In the last days of December, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) quietly proposed a new set of Clean Air Act regulations that quite literally leave Mono Lake in the dust.

The newly proposed regulations will abandon existing clean air standards that govern the toxic dust storms caused by past water diversions—and they'll do it twice! First, the EPA is proposing to eliminate regulation of windblown dust—just the kind that comes off the exposed bed of Mono Lake. Second, the EPA is also proposing to abandon the relevant “PM₁₀ particulate” regulations in rural areas across the country, including the Mono Basin.

Toxic dust storms have been a health hazard at Mono Lake ever since excessive water diversions from Mono Lake's tributary streams caused the lake level to decline, exposing thousands of acres of dry, dusty lakebed. In fact, the exposed lakebed is one of the largest single sources of particulate matter air pollution in the United States. Dust storms from the alkali-encrusted bed of Mono Lake are full of small particles that lodge in the lungs and they can also contain arsenic and other toxins. Mono's dust storms have been measured to contain particle concentrations of up to 10,500 µg/m³, vastly exceeding the current standard of 150 µg/m³.

There are serious concerns beyond public health as well. 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. This is strong support for the requirement that the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power limit its water diversions. Without federal air pollution standards, could Mono Lake be vulnerable to excessive water diversions again? Let's not find out!

The EPA, usually respected as a public health agency, appears to be playing a game of politics. In fact, the EPA's

very own Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee has publicly stated its opposition to the EPA's proposed new rules!

Officials at the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District, which oversees Mono Lake dust pollution, see the

new regulations as extremely problematic. In addition to the health threats, they note that retaining standards in urban areas while abandoning them in rural areas is a “14th Amendment ‘equal protection’ and environmental justice issue.”

The Mono Lake Committee is also concerned about the Mono Basin's tourism-based economy. If clean air goals are abandoned and dust storms rage unabated, tourism is sure to decline.

The Committee is calling for the EPA to make two critical changes to the proposed regulations:

1. The EPA must apply the PM_{10-2.5} standard to the Mono Lake area, the Owens Valley, and the entire country, not

just urban areas.

2. The EPA must use the PM_{10-2.5} standard to regulate windblown dust, in particular the dust originating from the exposed bed of Mono Lake; creating a loophole is not appropriate for pollution of this magnitude.

Other groups are concerned about the EPA's proposed rule changes, too, but Mono Lake supporters need to speak up for Mono Lake specifically. The Committee will be mailing an Action Alert with further details to all members. Details are also available at www.monolake.org. ❖

**If the EPA gets its way,
these air quality monitors will
just gather dust.**



**Speak up for Mono Lake
before April 17!**

GEORGE MCQUILKIN

How you can help!

You can submit comments on the EPA's plan to change the air quality rules up until April 17. Watch your mailbox for an Action Alert from the Committee with more details and a sample comment letter to sign or to reference when writing your own.

You can also visit our website www.monolake.org or call (760) 647-6595 for more detailed information.