Denver air to be toughest cleanup task

By JANET DAY
Rocky Mountain News Environmental Writer

Cleaning up Denver's notoriously dirty air will be the state's biggest environmental challenge in the coming year, public health officials say.

The state stands to lose $30 million in federal highway funds if carbon monoxide levels in the metro area don't meet federal standards by the end of 1987.

Levels in the seven-county Front Range area routinely exceed the federal standard by as much as two or three times and are considered the worst in the nation.

Most health officials concede there's little chance the year-end deadline will be met, but pressure increased last month with indications EPA will not make concessions for good efforts toward cleaning the air.

Other challenges facing the Colorado Department of Health and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, as well as local agencies and governments, are to continue efforts made in the past year or so in cleaning up hazardous waste disposal sites and preventing new sites from forming.

But 1987 may well be dubbed the year of carbon monoxide control.

Carbon monoxide is a clear, odorless gas that comes mainly from automobile exhaust.

At moderate levels, it can aggravate respiratory problems or existing medical problems and irritate the eyes, throat and nose of the healthy. Higher levels pose a serious threat to the ill, elderly and pregnant.

"For Denver, the two major issues are the CO deadline and what happens if, or more likley when, we don't meet the standards," said John Welles, EPA Region 8 administrator in Denver. "Some people say that without sanctions, we'll never get the air cleaned up. Others think that's too harsh."

Local officials had hoped EPA would view the state's dozen or so clean-air strategies as a "reasonable further effort" and not withhold highway funding. A recent legal opinion, however, indicates EPA may not have the authority to make that decision.

"It's not up to EPA to make good government decisions," Welles said. "And if that is what happens, there will probably be a lot of legislative activity by the end of the year."

Among the clean-air programs under consideration last year and likely to be implemented in some form this year are a stricter automobile inspection and maintenance program; a diesel inspection program; mandatory cleaner diesel fuel; mandatory cleaner burning gasoline alternatives in the winter months and idling restrictions.

> "For Denver, the two major issues are the CO deadline and what happens if, or more likley when, we don't meet the standards. Some people say that without sanctions, we'll never get the air cleaned up. Others think that's too harsh."
>
> **John Welles, EPA Region 8 administrator**

Current woodburning bans and the two-month Better Air Campaign to reduce driving in the winter will be continued, but officials are gearing up for a hard-sell campaign.

The only available figures on the 1986-87 Better Air Campaign show that while 99% of those surveyed were aware of Denver's air pollution, only 20% actually reduced driving on the first high pollution day.

"We've achieved phenomenal awareness about the Better Air Campaign and air problems, but the key question is are we going to make the leap from awareness to significant behavior change in the way we use the automobile," said Tom Vernon, state health department director. "To have clean air in Denver is going to require individual citizens to make choices about their cars, make the leap from awareness to behavior."

Cleaning the air in 1987 also will be a priority of Gov.-elect Roy Romer, who late last year outlined a 10-point plan to meet federal air quality standards.

The plan incorporates many strategies already under study as well as strict enforcement of existing laws, improving traffic flows, negotiating with industries to develop less polluting ways to do business and encouraging state colleges to research other ways to reduce pollution.

"Air quality is on the top of the list (of environmental issues for the year), both economically and environmentally," Romer said. "In addition to the 10-point plan, we'll be focusing on the busways with (the Regional Transportation District) and better roads in the whole metro area to help reduce congestion."

Many other environmental issues will require continuing the strides made in 1986.

"We've got some wonderful opportunities in the next years, based on a series of tools now in place and precedents set in 1986," Vernon said.

Those precedents include a settlement with Martin Marietta Denver Aerospace over groundwater contamination; a cleanup agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy for Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility; a settlement with Union Carbide for removing contaminated mining wastes in western Colorado and agreements with the U.S. Army over groundwater cleanup in south Adams County.

"Many of these are continuing, 20-year projects. They won't be solved this year," Vernon said.

K 1/1

ADMIN RECORD
SW-A-003527