

Early ozone season

Clean-air panel explores funding

Task force brainstorms finances in an era of flat budget allocations for environmental quality

By **Judy Fahys**
The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated:05/18/2007 01:19:02 AM MDT

It's one thing to want the air to be cleaner and another to actually come up with the money to clean it.

A new task force met this week to brainstorm new funding options for clean air just as ozone levels began to rise, prompting air-quality officials to remind the public that people can drive less and take other actions to protect summer air quality.

This year's ozone season officially began Thursday, two weeks earlier than usual in Salt Lake, Davis and Utah counties. Last summer, environmental officials called 16 no-drive days. And over the winter, high fine-particle pollution triggered an unprecedented number of high-pollution days.

Creation of the task force follows a legislative session that left the Department of Environmental Quality's overall budget flat at nearly \$83 million, with one-time increases in state funding and decreases in federal dollars. While lawmakers gave many other state government programs big chunks of a \$1.7 billion budget surplus, they gave state environmental programs an infusion of just over \$1.5 million to study mercury and to address the federal government's tougher, new air-quality standards.

That leaves the task force with the chore of suggesting to lawmakers the smartest way to cut pollution while not sticking any single interest group with too much of the cost. DEQ Director Dianne Neilson told lawmakers Wednesday that about \$3 million is needed each year for air-quality planning.

The group includes people from industry, the Legislature, environmental quality officials and environmental groups.

Industry representatives were at Tuesday's inaugural meeting to remind everyone they have faced increasing state fees even as they cut pollution. Truckers were there to discuss the impacts of, say, higher fuel taxes on their business.

Environmentalists and the new advocacy group, Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment, were on hand to remind everyone about the public health costs of failing to address pollution.

Rick Sprott, director of the air-quality division, said lawmakers don't have the time during their regular meetings to deliberate funding details like these. "The legislators need to hear from all of these interests before they go into session," he said.

Gerald Ross, a member of the doctors' group, said more money is needed to address environmental concerns in Utah. His group has been pushing, for example, for money to fund umbilical cord blood studies, which are an important tool in studying human exposure to mercury and other environmental contaminants.

"We would like to see a funding increase," he said.

The task force will report to lawmakers, and possibly suggest legislation, in September.

fahys@sltrib.com

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