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Clean air: the health and economic arguments

Owen Hanley 14 hrs ago

News-Miner Community Perspective:

Prolonged periods of unhealthy air quality have become more frequent during Fairbanks winters in the last decade. Cold air temperature inversions that can trap pollutants are not new and will not go away. Our problem is due to a marked increase in the production of pollutants, especially small particulate matter called PM 2.5.

Atmospheric chemists at the University of Alaska and others have determined that more than half of these PM 2.5 particles come from wood smoke.

This creates two problems: a health problem, and an economic problem.

The health problem is real, and its magnitude is large. It is not an invention of the Environmental Protection Agency. It is not the invention of a few environmental extremists. There are now thousands of studies in the medical and scientific literature confirming that breathing polluted air is a serious health risk. The American Academy of Science, the World Health Organization, the American Lung Association, the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association have all confirmed the association between air pollution and disease.

Toxins in polluted air harm the developing fetus, are associated with premature births, prevent children from developing full lung capacity and are absorbed into the blood stream, making blood sticky and resulting in heart attacks, strokes and blood clots. Dementia comes earlier to those exposed to more air pollution. More deaths are attributable to air pollution than to drunk driving. We take measures to prevent drunk driving; we should do the same with air pollution. We do not allow our neighbors' sewage to pollute our wells and the water we drink; why should we allow our neighbor's dirty wood stove smoke to pollute the air we breathe?

The economic problem is also real and large. The cost of not cleaning the air is too large for our community to bear. Last year, Alaskans spent more than \$8 billion for health care. The leading cause of personal bankruptcy is medical bills. One day in the hospital costs more than a year of heating bills. A one month supply of asthma inhalers for one child costs more than a month's home heating for an entire family. The World Health Organization states that for every dollar spent cleaning up air pollution, \$12 will be saved in health-related costs. Dirty air not only makes us sick, it also makes us poor.

Bad air quality in Fairbanks is a solvable problem. The first step is accepting that we have a problem. The next step is working as a community to solve our problem. Work for clean air because it wins both the health and economic arguments.

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