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TOP STORY

GAZETTE OPINION

Guest opinion: Struggles against air pollution in Billings

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On March 20, The Billings Gazette posted an article about our three area refineries and sugar beet factory, and their smokestacks (“Is the Big Sky blowing smoke?”). After talking with a couple industry public relations people, the reporter contends that “it’s not air pollution,” but merely “water vapor” and “clouds.”

Really? Let’s take another look.

In the 1990s, the Gazette reported that Billings had the highest annual concentrations of sulfur dioxide (SO₂) of any city in America — concentrations coming straight from refinery smokestacks. In 1989, the Gazette editorialized that “if we want Billings to become economically vibrant and sound, we must have air cleaner than it is now.”

As a lifelong Billings resident, I grew up within range of three oil refineries, Corette coal-power plant, and a sugar beet processing plant. Air pollution was something we took for granted. Later, as an adult living in the Heights, my neighbor was Nettie Lees, an Avon lady who

routinely visited one hundred homes. We both suffered from asthma. Nettie keenly observed the number of children missing school with respiratory problems whenever we, also, were having breathing problems.

Lethal SO2 emissions

Nettie and I became partners investigating the source of these respiratory coincidences. We visited with others in the neighborhood, and discovered that many were experiencing the same thing. We called the Montana Board of Health in Helena, presented our story at their board meeting, and asked lots of questions. That's when we first learned about sulfur dioxide (SO₂), and the way it affects human health. You can't see or smell SO₂, but it sharply increases the risk of respiratory illness, and aggravates conditions like asthma and bronchitis.

Also, we learned about air inversions. They occur frequently over Billings which is built in a valley floor. Inversions create a lid across the valley that holds the pollution under it until the inversion eventually breaks up.

To combat this pollution — and to protect our health — Nettie and I helped form a local concerned citizens group: Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council. YVCC campaigned for local air quality monitoring; lobbied county commissioners; and, lobbied legislators in Helena to establish enforceable air quality standards.

On our way home from a YVCC meeting in 1985, Nettie and I drove through a dense pollution stream at ground level in downtown Billings. It immediately triggered an asthma attack from which Nettie never recovered. She died 24 hours later.

Lobbying for cleaner air

YVCC doubled down. We successfully pushed the Montana Air Quality Bureau in the Department of Environmental Quality to develop enforceable standards limiting SO₂ and other hazardous emissions. The Legislature finally enacted them. However, major polluters—among them, Exxon and CHS refineries in Yellowstone County — lobbied successfully to be exempted from those standards.

It took another 10 years to get their exemptions repealed, and more years to bring the major polluters in Yellowstone County into compliance. Air quality problems didn't end there, however. As recently as 2007, refineries here were found to be in violation — some with as many as 1,000 instances of noncompliance within the year.

Facilities have been forced to update their equipment, acquiring latest technologies. Our air quality is improved. But, even in compliance, refineries discharge thousands of tons of sulfur dioxide into our air each year. And, we have air inversions that spike pollutant levels. Still, respiratory illness is a major local health issue. Still, we are at risk from things we can't smell or see.

Don't believe "it's not air pollution."

MORE INFORMATION



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