Air quality in Utah

A serious concern for the state’s health and economy

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The Wasatch Front, the place most of Utah’s population calls home, is developing a reputation for bad air.

This has obvious health ramifications, which are already cited in studies connecting air pollution to increased death rates, adverse cardiac effects, childhood asthma and other conditions.

But there may also be economic consequences of bad air: Will businesses choose to locate in other states because of environmental quality issues? For businesses that are located here, will there be long-term health costs associated with bad air — such as employees taking more sick leave or a rise in health insurance expenses because employees need treatment for exposure to questionable air?

HOW IS AIR POLLUTION IN UTAH DIFFERENT FROM THE REST OF THE U.S.?

Utah doesn’t emit more pollution than other large metropolitan areas in the country, but a variety of factors make the state’s pollution unique. Along the Wasatch Front, there are high levels of fine particulate matter during the winter and high levels of ozone during the summer. Utah has attracted the most attention for its winter inversions. These are caused when storms bring snow that rests on the valley’s floors. Intermittent warm high-pressure systems trap the cold air, creating the effect of a lid on a soup bowl and keeping dirty air from car emissions and other pollutants from escaping. (New York Times, “Utah Struggles With Air Quality” Feb. 23, 2013)

WHAT IS THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH PROGRAM FOR AIR QUALITY, HEALTH AND SOCIETY?

The program is a newly created (December 2012) initiative that will provide an opportunity to catalyze research collaborations across various university departments and disciplines.

With support from the Offices of the Senior Vice President for Health Sciences, the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Vice President for Research, as well as the College of Engineering and the Southwest Consortium for Environmental Research and Policy, the program seeks to use Utah’s unique environmental situation to become a national leader in understanding the consequences of air pollution for human health and economic development.

WHY IS NOW THE TIME FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH PROGRAM TO EMERGE?

There is a strong need for good, objective data to help with decision making as the discussion over air quality in Utah continues. Several advocacy groups exist, but the University of Utah is ideally situated to offer a wealth of scientific data to the debate.

Utah’s Division of Air Quality reports that so far in the winter of 2013, Salt Lake County has experienced 22 days in which pollution levels have exceeded federal air quality standards. A year ago, there was only one day in which pollution levels exceeded standards. Federal safe air standards are set at 35 micrograms of particles per cubic meter of air — about the weight of a single crystal of table salt — averaged over a 24-hour period. During January inversions, Salt Lake County reached 69 micrograms per cubic meter, while nearby Utah County received up to 125 micrograms, according to the division of air quality. (New York Times, “Utah Struggles With Air Quality” Feb. 23, 2013)

These statistics — and a growing public interest over Utah’s air — makes now the right time for the university to catalyze its broad expertise and study the issue from a multitude of angles.