

A big opportunity for clean air: Looking Back, looking ahead

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February 3 was a day like no other in the fight for clean air in Oregon. On that day, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) announced that an area of Southeast Portland had alarmingly high levels of both cadmium and arsenic that could impact people's health. The information came from a study conducted by the U.S. Forest Service on how well tree

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moss can trap and therefore pinpoint air pollution sources (the short answer: very well).

While we have known for years that the air in parts of Oregon (especially urban areas) is toxic, it had been challenging until this

study to pinpoint exact industrial sources due to inadequate and under-funded state permitting and monitoring limitations. It had also been challenging until the shocking results of this study to attract the attention of key decision makers and enough Oregonians to push successfully for improvements that prioritize Oregonians' health. The fact is, moments like this one are often needed to create the urgency and momentum needed for real change.

Since February, both Oregonians and key decision makers — specifically the governor, Multnomah County, the city of Portland, and the state legislators who represent people nearest the industrial pollution sources — have paid a lot of attention to this issue and are taking solid steps to reduce air pollution from the top two sources: industrial facilities and diesel engines.

Pollution from industrial facilities, like the cadmium and arsenic uncovered by the moss study, is being addressed through the state's Cleaner Air Oregon process, an initiative of Governor Brown's intended to assess and update the state's air pollution regulations to prevent adverse health impacts in the future. This will be accomplished through a unique rulemaking collaboration between DEQ and the Oregon Health Authority. There is, in our opinion, much room for improvement! We are actively participating in this process along with other community groups and, of course, industry, to be sure that the outcome leads to the cleanest air possible. Details about the process, which is slated to conclude with new rule recommendations to the state Environmental Quality Commission in December 2017, is available at cleanerair.oregon.gov.

An important reason to focus on health-based standards for industrial air pollution sources is their disproportionate impact on communities where residents are more

likely to be low-income and people of color. Air pollution is an environmental justice issue and it is past time that these communities have

healthy, clean air to breathe. To do that, regulations must go beyond technology-based standards to incorporate the unique vulnerabilities of impacted communities and risk data that considers cumulative risk. It is critical that the voices of those most affected by air pollution are at the table to share truths and experiences and be an active part of the decision making process as the state debates the right solution. Neighbors for Clean Air is committed to a process that includes environmental justice communities. For too long decisions about their health have been made without their input, and that must stop.

While industrial hot spots can put individual neighborhoods at high risk, pollution from diesel engines causes the most significant harm to the most people from air pollution in Oregon. This solvable problem can and should be addressed by our state legislature in the upcoming 2017 session, which begins in early February. We are proposing legislation that would bring

Oregon's diesel engine regulations into line with both California and Washington requirements that older diesel engines,

which pollute far more than newer ones, be retired from use or retrofitted to run cleaner. Because Oregon has not taken this step, not only are we permitting more harmful pollution, we are now the dumping ground for dirty engines no

longer allowed to harm people's health in these neighboring states.

For over a decade, advocates who have fought for stronger diesel standards have been stymied by the cost of compliance. But this year is different. Oregon is set to receive \$68 million from the 2014 Volkswagen diesel fraud settlement. Our state legislators should ensure that these funds are tied to passing the proposed diesel emissions standard because without this new standard that we won't make a real dent in the problem.

It's important to focus on diesel engine pollution because when burned it releases ultra-fine particulate matter, or "PM2.5" (particulate matter less than 2.5 microns).

Oregon's reliance on old diesel engines translates into a significant public health cost, including 469 premature deaths a year.

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