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Cache is still chasing solution to poor air quality

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LOGAN - Cache Valley's first major snowstorm of the season provided encouragement to officials who hope to clear the air this season.

But the northern Utah valley most likely still faces Environmental Protection Agency violations before the end of the year or early January.

"That's almost a given, unfortunately," said Ed Redd, medical director at the Bear River Health Department and chairman of a Cache Valley air quality task force, speaking at a public meeting Tuesday that was hosted jointly by Logan City and Cache County officials.

The good news, he says, is that the area may be able to avoid EPA penalties in light of the community-driven progress being made to educate the public and reduce air pollution. Collaboration among health department officials, Utah State University professors and city officials is yielding valuable research findings, he says.

"We're really ahead of the game because we're already in the process of trying to do things to improve the air quality before the EPA tells us we have to."

For example, Redd told the joint councils that data from traffic monitors embedded in the asphalt at two major intersections on Logan's Main Street indicate a quantitative correlation between miles driven and the level of air pollution.

On Sundays, when the average number of cars on the road drops from 80,000 to 45,000, air-pollution levels during inversions are up to 30 percent lower, he said.

This seemingly "no-brainer" finding provides the quantitative data for officials to use to predict future pollution patterns and to plan accordingly - something the EPA encourages.

Emissions testing may seem like another easy solution, but Redd says Cache Valley's air-pollution problem is unique, and researchers need to gather thorough data before moving ahead.

"Doing emissions inspections without having the science behind it is not a very good idea," Redd said. "If we inspect our cars or try and fix our cars for the wrong thing . . . we could spend a half a million dollars or \$2 million on emissions inspections and get worse air quality than we already have."

Meanwhile, Cache County Council Chairman H. Craig Petersen says residents may be asked to help generate some "seed money" to pay for air-quality materials and plans.

"One of the things we've thought about as a funding source is a relatively nominal fee when you register your car," Petersen said, adding that there are about 75,000 cars in Cache Valley. "There's a good chance that we may be coming back to the council and asking you to consider a \$2 or \$3 fee."

Cloudy skies over Cache Valley this week are reminiscent of a 500-foot thick white haze that hung over the area for more than 40 days beginning in late December 2004.

"When the air is really stagnant, the air quality inside your house is better than it is outdoors," Redd said.