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Commentary

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Utah Dirty Air Defies Quick Answers

The headlines in the Deseret News on January 25, 2014 shouted an alarming message, “Drowning in Utah’s dirty air: Utah families, top elected officials search for solutions.” When it comes to looking at the dirty air around us, we often become oblivious to the potential health concerns that threaten the very lives of our families and friends in Utah. We know that Utah has poor air quality, but we don’t always feel the harm it does unless it affects us personally. We go about our everyday activities and just hope that the air will clear out soon. As citizens of the state of Utah, it behooves each of us to earnestly study the issues facing us on air pollution and health concerns. The reality is that without increased awareness by individuals and government to help create measures to clear the air each of us may find that we face many more health issues in the future.

Christine Frandsen is a true believer when she hears the Deseret News report that the air we breathe is even dirtier than the air in Beijing. She lives with the problem on a daily basis with her children. The air quality is so disruptive for their family that she actually has to pack their belongings and drive to St. George to stay with her parents to escape the pollution and keep her children healthy.



Figure 1-Christine Frandsen helps children with breathing during inversion

Their daily lives are disrupted as they leave their home and school behind. She has been accused of not taking care of her children because they are not in school. Her reply to those accusations to the Deseret News reporter is that she could take the children out of school and make sure they were breathing cleaner air or she could stay here and have them in the hospital. Christine is placed in a delicate position as she tries to meet the needs of her children.

However, Christine is not the only person who has to make choices to deal with the air in Utah. The issues related to health concerns from air pollution and supported by data from the American Lung Association are reinforced by local doctors. Dr. Brian Moench spoke to the Daily Herald on February 27, 2014 and questioned if the state is actually disclosing all of the data that shows how harmful air pollution is. When local doctors begin to question if we are doing everything we can to improve air quality, it makes the personal issues faced by the Frandsen family more of a reality that certainly can affect every one of us.

The state government is equally frustrated as they try to balance this delicate question through new legislation and their decisions are equally hard. Governor Herbert addressed the issue of air pollution in his State of the State address in January of 2014 and called for urgent measures to help with the issue. Legislators were left wondering how much their efforts would accomplish as they spoke with reporters from the Daily Herald. Herbert suggested that transition to a cleaner-burning gasoline would be a solution to the problem. However, legislators questioned how this would help since that type of fuel is not available and only works with newer cars. The question arises as to how much we really can regulate the fuel and types of cars everyone drives. While there may be incentives for people to buy newer more efficient cars, the economics of that idea is not a reality for the majority of the citizens. Honda's website quotes the starting price of a Civic natural gas car to be \$26,640. This price tag puts this type of

transportation out of the reach of most of our citizens and would certainly not be something that the government could begin to require everyone to purchase.

Governor Herbert also called for the reduction of use of wood burning stoves and again questions arose as to how this could be enforced. The Daily Herald reported that there are at least 200 households in the Salt Lake area that are dependent upon wood burnings stoves for the main heat in the homes. Legislators are unwilling to deprive people of their source of heat in the winter. Breathe Utah has offered natural gas-fired pot-bellied stoves to help with the situation, but only have five stoves to contribute to the problem. The other issue that arises with this question is that many people just don't want to give up a fireplace in the winter. The call for a winter ban on fireplaces would mean that they would need an army of inspectors to check all of the homes and even environmental groups question how we could police the neighborhoods.

Transportation issues and smoke filled air are certainly major problems facing individuals and our government. These questions will continue to be debated, but what are the immediate individual changes that we can make to help improve our air quality. Breathe Utah promotes the idea that we can each make a difference if we walk, bike, car share, or use mass transportation to reduce vehicle emissions. Other ideas that I would recommend include planning trips so that you shop closer to home or plan errands --"trip chaining"--to be done on just one day a week after peak traffic hours and make sure you do not idle more than 10 seconds at any stop. The facts speak for themselves as reported by Breathe Utah. If we eliminate five separate 1 mile trips, we will actually reduce ozone-related pollution as much as eliminating a 15 mile trip. Individual changes can mean major benefits and do not need the approval or enforcement of the government.

It is never easy to have the government become the enforcer of laws. However, I would recommend that current laws such as the Idle Free Law and No Burn Days be more strictly enforced. A law is of little value if residents know they will not have to pay consequences for violating it. Some areas that I suggest the state of Utah look into would include setting aside money for the free use of UTA on the high inversion days. This would help those who are unable to actually purchase the more fuel efficient cars. Government could help to phase out the use of wood burning stoves by offering a tax credit to those who need to convert to a different type of heat source for their homes.

Businesses in Utah need to share in the responsibility of cleaning up our air. Businesses could adopt policies that would promote staggered work hours, four day work weeks, or giving workers incentives to ride Trax. Cooperation between government and business could create an atmosphere where people are not on the highways during the peak driving hours and reduce pollution.

Future discussions need to focus on the economic issues and health issues we are facing in Utah. We need to face the fact that there need to be sacrifices by individuals, business and government. Incentives to help those that are unable to comply with the transportation and heat issues that might overwhelm them may be difficult to fund, but an important part of the solution to this problem. This issue is not only a public issue, but a personal one for each of us to address and as individuals we should become involved in helping to legislate and express our ideas and concerns along with making personal decisions to promote healthy air.