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By Terry Bibo (tbibo@pjstar.com) of the Journal Star

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PEORIA — Central Illinois taxpayers may want to ignore the snow and pray for another cool July.

Mild weather - plus pollution-curbing cooperation from business, government and local consumers - could help Peoria avoid federal intervention that might plague the area for years. Not to mention improving public health in the short run.

"In some ways, you do have your future in your own hands," said Ross Patronsky of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "You've got this summer."

Ozone levels are highest in hot, sunny weather.

Patronsky was one of nine panelists at an air quality forum Wednesday sponsored by the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission. The forum discussed the possibility of tighter standards for ground-level ozone that have been proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Non-attainment" of those standards can trigger mandatory changes that affect transportation projects, consumers and businesses.

"While I wouldn't say it's a game stopper . . . it's certainly a game changer," said Patricia Ludewig of Caterpillar Inc., who said the company has plants in the Chicago area that fall into that category.

She said Caterpillar considers clean air a company value and works to meet any regulations, but there is a downside.

"It does increase your costs," she said. "It increases your project timeline."

The Clean Air Act says costs should not be a factor in the EPA's decision. But even medical members of the panel said that's hard to avoid.

"Where do you draw the line?" said Dr. Stephen Smart.

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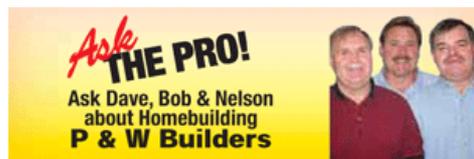
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From the viewpoint of an asthmatic child, he said, the ozone level should be zero. But there are many factors in the physical effects of ozone, including the duration of higher levels and physical exertion. Along with measures the local area can take to lower the ozone level, there are measures individuals can take to protect themselves. That puts the proposed changes in a more practical perspective.

"It looks like there are real health effects in the range we are talking about," Smart said.

Peoria has fluttered around the current standard of 0.075 parts per million. The proposed range is somewhere between 0.070 and 0.060. Where and when it falls makes all the difference.

"If the standard is set at 0.070 . . . there is a chance, depending on meteorology this summer, that the Peoria area could avoid non-attainment," said Rob Kaleel of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. At 0.060 to 0.065, he said, "All bets are off. You're going to be in non-attainment."

This summer is key because ozone levels are determined by averaging the measurements over three years. In 2007, the level was 0.081.

"Right now, based on three years of data, Peoria is sitting at 0.072," said Kaleel.

Compared to Chicago, Patronsky said, Peoria's problem is much smaller and can be addressed. Some efforts are already under way, plus cleaner cars and other efforts to reduce pollution will have an increasing effect on future numbers.

"Our feeling is on-the-books controls coupled with emission standards will probably be sufficient to bring the area into attainment," said Dave Kolaz of the Illinois Manufacturers Association. "Right now, there's already been a lot of money invested."

But the panelists agreed that local efforts can make a difference, especially in the next few months.

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To make a comment

Until March 22, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will accept comments on its proposed changes to the ozone standards.

If you would like to make a comment:

- Go to the federal eRulemaking portal at regulations.gov.

- E-mail a-and-r-docket@epa.gov.

- Send mail to EPA Docket Center, Environmental Protection Agency, Mail code 6102T, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20460

"If it ends up at 0.070 - and you're right there - I'd really try to emphasize the areas you have control over. That might be enough," said Douglas Aburano, U.S. EPA environmental engineer. "If the standard is set at 0.065, you're going to be in non-attainment. . . . If it's at 0.060, it's going to be a complete game changer, not just for Peoria, but for the whole country."

Terry Bibo can be reached at tbibo@pjstar.com or 686-3189.

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