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EPA targets other part of region's pollution

By **RICHARD POWELSON**, powelsonr@shns.com

July 4, 2004

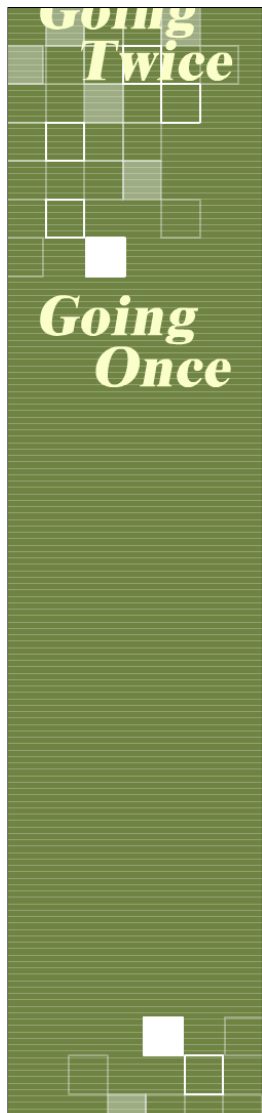


**RICHARD
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East Tennessee received more bad news about its air pollution last week when federal officials identified nine counties that likely will be found to be violating air standards for soot.

Soot, also called fine particles, can aggravate lung or heart disease and cause premature death. It comes from combustion from power plants, motor vehicles, wood burning and certain industrial processes.

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last week announced that preliminary data suggests the following Tennessee counties may be violating federal air standards for soot: Knox, Anderson, Blount, Loudon, McMinn, Roane, Sevier, Hamilton and Marion. A final decision is planned in November.

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., who has a house near the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, has a clear view of the often unclear air in the park. So he has been promoting new air pollution controls that he says would reduce air pollution faster than President Bush's proposal.

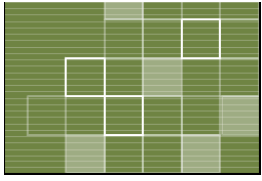
Alexander, chairman of the Senate energy subcommittee, has been exploring ways to reduce air pollution nationally but especially in the Tennessee Valley. He found that coal-fired power plants contribute as much as 50 percent of the particle pollution and 85 percent of the visibility problem in the Smokies park.

The Tennessee Valley Authority operates coal-fired power plants that provide about 60 percent of the wholesale electricity for Tennessee and most of its border states. TVA officials often talk about how they spend \$1 million a day on average to reduce air pollution at its plants, have spent \$4 billion on controls the past three decades and are in the process of spending \$2 billion more.

But environmental groups have said TVA just is not doing enough fast enough to reduce health concerns.

The Southern Alliance for Clean Energy said state officials should use the latest EPA findings on soot to seek faster progress in reducing fine-particle pollution from such sources as power plants and diesel engines. Addressing the problem sooner rather than later will not only improve health but also remove a potential obstacle to business recruitment in the region.

Alexander has said cleaner air is vital to keeping adequate jobs and tourism revenues in



Tennessee. The Great Smoky Mountains park, which attracts many people to witness its beautiful views, is the nation's most-visited national park.

The federal government's pace in addressing the soot pollution is not encouraging. It has been working on defining standards or fighting litigation about them since before 1997.

Under the current EPA timetable, the agency will decide in November which counties definitely violate air standards. Then states have nearly four years to file plans to meet air standards. After that, all counties are supposed to meet the standards by 2010, but certain counties may win extensions up to 2015.

Particle pollution is serious business, since older people with advanced diseases of the lung, for example, and small children with asthma, for example, can die during periods of high pollution.

There are about 1,200 air-quality monitors across the country to help alert high-risk groups when it is unsafe to go outdoors, especially for strenuous activity. The index shows when it is unhealthy for sensitive groups to go outside for prolonged periods of physical activity.

A Web site, www.epa.gov/airnow, gives daily air quality information for many locations, including Knoxville.

The News Sentinel's daily weather page also notes the recent air quality readings. And the Knox County air information line, 865-215-5925, gives frequent updates.

As Alexander says, there has to be a national remedy that both reduces the dirty air from other states blowing into Tennessee and the pollution produced in Tennessee that carries into various counties and states.

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