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HEADLINE: Scientist sees bad days ahead for gorge air

BYLINE: MICHAEL MILSTEIN, The Oregonian

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SUMMARY: Pollution | Professor Dan **Jaffe** counters air regulators' claims that quality is improving

THE DALLES --The air looked like dull gray soup. Mount Hood was invisible in the haze. Barges looked as if they were steaming into the fog.

It was Nov. 7, 2002 --a bad air day in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. It brought the worst air pollution --in terms of the number of haze particles --since 1993, rising very close to levels classified as unhealthy.

Such days, the worst of the worst in the gorge, continue unabated, a leading Northwest air scientist said Tuesday. They have been especially common since 2001, he said.

The findings by Dan Jaffe, a professor of atmospheric and environmental chemistry at the University of Washington, counter earlier suggestions by Oregon and Washington air regulators that air quality in the gorge is getting better.

A coalition of the Yakama, Warm Springs, Umatilla and Nez Perce tribes hired Jaffe to examine gorge air trends. The tribes and environmental groups have argued that air agencies are doing too little to clear the air in the gorge, recognized as one of the most polluted natural areas in the West.

Jaffe found a slight improvement in the annual average pollution levels each year from 1993 through 2004, as judged from a monitoring site near The Dalles. But he said the number of the dirtiest days, which have the greatest effect on human health and the environment, isn't declining.

"The frequency of bad air days is not changing and the peak concentrations (of pollution particles) are not improving," he told the Columbia River Gorge Commission.

When Jaffe tracked the source of the pollution on the 50 dirtiest-air days, he found that pollution on about 40 percent of those days was coming from the east. The chemical signature of the pollution suggested much of it came from the Boardman area, he said.

That's the location of Portland General Electric's coal-fired power plant and a major dairy cow and feedlot complex. Scientists hired by air agencies have earlier said emissions from the power plant may

react with ammonia from the feedlot to form haze particles that funnel into the gorge, especially in winter.

On about 20 percent of the 50 dirtiest days, the pollution came largely from the Portland area to the west, Jaffe said. For the remainder of the dirtiest days, it was difficult to identify the source of the pollution, he said.

Pollution from the east side of the gorge dominates in fall and winter, and creates dirtier air on average than pollution from the west, which more commonly arrives during summer.

While the dirtiest days in the gorge don't violate federal health standards designed for cities, Jaffe said the pollution levels probably do affect human health.

The area is beset by haze that obscures its expansive views and acid fog and rain that could damage ancient Native American rock art.

Though the gorge is a federally protected area, it doesn't carry the same level of air quality safeguards as a national park or wilderness area. After years of study, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and the Southwest Clean Air Agency, based in Vancouver, are expected later this year to propose a strategy to address gorge pollution problems.

PGE officials have acknowledged the widespread effects of pollution from their Boardman plant, built 30 years ago without pollution controls required on new plants today. The company will almost certainly install new equipment to control sulfur, nitrogen and mercury emissions there by 2012, at a cost of $200 million to $300 million, said Dennis Norton, PGE's manager of environmental services.

Paul Mairose, chief engineer of the Southwest Clean Air Agency, said that new pollution limits on diesel engines will also help reduce pollution in the gorge. He found positive news in Jaffe's conclusion that annual average pollution levels may have gotten slightly better, despite increasing population and traffic.

Gorge Commission member Judy Davis said once the air agencies propose an approach, "then it needs to move to what are we going to do for action."

Michael Milstein: 503-294-7689; michaelmilstein@

news.oregonian.com

ILLUSTRATION: Graphic by Steve Cowden/The Oregonian/Air pollution in the Gorge/

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