

Rural Air Quality Forum
February 23, 2006
Travel Lodge Silver Bridge Inn, Duncan, BC

Overview

On February 23, 2006, approximately 35 participants from around the province came together in Duncan to discuss the issue of air quality in rural communities. These included non-profit groups, federal and provincial environment agencies, municipal politicians, bylaw enforcement, BC Lung Association, regional health, a retired respirologist, researchers and concerned individuals.

The particular focus of their attention was on smoke pollution from outdoor burning and poor wood heating practices. The goals of this meeting were to:

1. Develop a position statement on behalf of the group that could be used by communities to invoke affirmative action across the province,
2. Identify potential/viable actions to abate smoke pollution, and
3. Network and exchange information.

1. Position Statement:

This group represents a credible body, which formally acknowledges that:

- Outdoor burning and poor wood heating practices place large numbers of people and the environment in BC communities at serious risk from exposure to particulate matter and a complex array of chemicals;
- There is ample global and local scientific and health knowledge to support this;
- In addition to health care and absenteeism, this costs society in many ways not presently being accounted for;
- The inhalation/ingestion of dioxins, PCB's, bisphenol-A, heavy metals etc. dispersed through the combustion of synthetic materials is cause for concern;
- An equivalent level of environmental health risk would not be tolerated elsewhere in society;
- There is support at the federal, provincial, and community levels, but a general reluctance to even examine the issue at the municipal level; and
- Biomass is a resource that can be utilized for economic and ecological benefit, instead of being burned.

2. General Agreements:

- Immediate need for provincial policy level that prohibits burning as a method of 'waste' disposal as part of the development process, particularly with the ongoing construction boom in the province.
- With this being an issue facing virtually every municipality in the Province, should it not be a priority for the Union of BC Municipalities?
- Municipalities are lacking in addressing the rural air quality issue
- It has long been recognized that the Ventilation Index is not a useful tool for air quality protection and therefore should not be referred to/endorsed in present and future policy making.
- BC Lung's upcoming 'Hub' would be effective allow communities to connect and share information, a process that has already been started.
- Airshed Planning is a needed, but long term strategy – should be part of community/social planning process.

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- Discussion Notes -

PM SOURCES In Question:

- Land Clearing/Backyard Burning
- Poor wood heating practices - smaller, hotter fires - education needed, old appliances
- Forestry cleanup/broadcast burns
- Fire prevention - risk management
- Fire Department practice burns (derelict buildings)

ISSUES:

- Children and seniors, those with heart/lung challenges at high risk
 - Growing aging population
- Hidden Costs
 - School/work absenteeism
 - Health care
 - Fire departments: false alarms, out of control burns, smoke complaints
 - Smoke complaints to various municipal departments, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Forests, 911, police, etc.
- Rights of the non-voting public (children, fetuses, the infirmed, disempowered) not acknowledged
- Extreme toxicity of burning 'Prohibited Materials' (incl. Plastics/PVC etc.) Dioxin/Furans, bisphenol-A, etc.
- Biomass as a resource – terrestrial/aquatic restoration; architectural landscaping; value added products (e.g. small mills, composting/mulch products), heating, erosion control, mill fuel, ethanol, gasification, etc.
- Jurisdiction – confused between Municipalities/MOE/Forests/Fire Departments/First Nations Land
- Monitoring – not necessarily reliable measure of exposure (number/location of monitors, averaging)
- Ventilation Index – not useful, perhaps detrimental
- Job creation – opportunities in biomass utilization

INCORRECT ASSUMPTIONS

- Forest fire protection - needed
- Burning is a necessary part of development
- Orchards – fire is needed to control pests/pathogens
- Fire is a 'natural' part of the ecosystem
- Smoke from the burning of organic material is not pollution (natural)
- Woodstove 'airtightness' is a measure of appliance quality

ACTION/STRATEGIES:

Communities/Groups

- A letter containing a similar Position Statement be drafted on behalf of all participating community groups to send to their local governments/UBCM to acknowledge the seriousness of the issue and request action?

Individuals

- Utilize as much biomass as possible for fuel, compost and habitat/ecological enhancement
- Burn dry, seasoned, smaller pieces of fuel - smaller, hotter, shorter fires for wood heating
- Utilize prime heating systems in shoulder seasons (milder weather)
- Compost as much as possible
- Purchase low emission wood heating appliances
- No burning of plastics/synthetic materials
- Do not use driftwood or mill ends for home heating

Long Term

- Promote the value of biomass – a community resource
- Airshed planning