

Air Quality in Oakridge

LRAPA to designate the town a 're attainment area'

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A new proposal in Oakridge would allow industry to develop in the area, but environmental activists say the plan will worsen already poor winter air quality and it's too soon to invite industry into the rural town.

The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency (LRAPA) plans to designate Oakridge as a re attainment area, a status that would allow new small industries to come into the area in exchange for pollution offsets.

Max Hueftle, who is heading up the project for LRAPA, says that "the gist of it is that the proposed new program would reduce residential wood smoke" by allowing industries moving into Oakridge to offset their pollution with woodstove exchange programs in the community for a "net air quality benefit."

The proposal requires new industries to remove old, inefficient woodstoves in residential homes and replace them with cleaner burning stoves.

Oakridge has a history of poor air quality compared to other towns in Lane County, particularly in the cold winter months when wood smoke from chimneys stagnates in the valley due to temperature inversions. During those time periods, often during dry cold snaps, the smoke-filled air stays settles in the valley prompting air stagnation warnings.

LRAPA documents state that poor air quality from particulate matter — which often comes from woodstoves — can accumulate in the respiratory system, causing harmful health effects including "heart disease; cardiovascular effects, such as heart attacks and strokes; reduced lung development; and chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma." The groups at highest risk include the elderly, those with cardiopulmonary diseases, and children.

Historically LRAPA has addressed this problem in Oakridge with woodstove change-out programs that replace old woodstoves with newer, certified woodstoves. From 1993 to 2011, LRAPA changed out 279 woodstoves. But Hueftle says the agency no longer has the grant funds available to continue the program.

Hueftle says bringing in industries under specific guidelines could help rather than hurt this air quality effort.

LRAPA proposes that industries wanting to build in Oakridge would essentially replace LRAPA's changeout program with their own.

An LRAPA document about the proposed reattainment area acknowledges that equivalent drops in emissions still lead to the same emissions, but points out that industrial pollution is consistent year-round, not focused during the winter months. Additionally, “Industrial stacks are taller with higher velocity for better emission dispersion,” the document says.

LRAPA suggests that the proposal could help Oakridge get to attainment by moving pollution from the wood stove sector to the industrial sector, which would help Oakridge meet daily attainment expectations as well as annual expectations. Oakridge most often misses attainment on stagnant winter days, so smoothing pollution over the entire year may help Oakridge meet air quality standards more consistently.

The LRAPA document also points out that industries would likely be located far away from residential housing, which could help prevent the negative health impacts associated with poor air quality from affecting residents.

But environmental activists say it’s too early to invite industry into Oakridge. Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics, says of Oakridge: “They’ve only achieved their goal for one year and it’s only barely below the benchmark. So if you moved industry in you’d erase whatever progress you’ve made.”

“When you look at small particulate matter, they’re the worst in the area,” Arkin adds.

Kevin Matthews, a community advocate and candidate for East Lane County Commissioner, says he sees the rule proposal as a loophole. “What they’re trying to do with the reattainment area is put in some loopholes so that what they call medium-sized pollution sources can still get permitted even though the area is under tight EPA controls for historical pollution.”

Matthews suggests LRAPA is going forward with this new designation to allow polluters like the proposed TV Butte gravel quarry to work in Oakridge, though Hueftle says it’s unrelated. “The gravel mine has nothing to do with these regulations. LRAPA does not regulate gravel pits or mines,” Hueftle says.

LRAPA data from 2009 and 2010 show that woodstoves are the largest source of pollutants, Matthews says, but the agency hasn’t done more recent studies about pollution sources, so current data is just extrapolated from that original study. “I don’t think they have a good enough system to reliably prove to us that this offsets idea is going to work.”

He suggests that LRAPA could put a focus on better insulation to help reduce emissions and wood usage. “There’s a straightforward way to reduce air pollution, and that’s to reduce air pollution in each sector.”

Matthews says that LRAPA should show “that Oakridge is in attainment, then do a maintenance plan to show that it will stay in attainment. That would be the straight way to meet EPA requirements.”

Hueftle says the goal of the reattainment area is to “ensure that the air quality in Oakridge will not get worse as a result of new or modified sources; and, in most cases, will improve the air quality” because industries would be required to implement an offset program in order to locate in Oakridge.

Those who wish to weigh in on the decision should submit written comments on the LRAPA website or by email to Robbye Lanier at robbye@lrapa.org by Friday, Dec. 29, at 5 pm.

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Pam Driscoll • 5 hours ago

Already on the books is when a sale of a home takes place, old polluting woodstoves must be replaced or removed. I would like to see a ban on slash burning! Why is this allowed? Because it's a cheap way to clear wood debris. Why not chip it back onto the ground to add nutrient to the soil? Huge amounts of wood is burned every year as slash. Wasteful and NO filters as in newer, cleaner woodstoves to heat homes.

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flashsteve • 7 hours ago

Just exchanging old for new wood stove technology does not guarantee that homeowners will not continue to improperly operate their stoves and pollute the air. It's like replacing old cars with new, and then drivers hot rod around, using just as much gas a before.

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Kevin Matthews - Lane County • 9 hours ago

Thank you, Eugene Weekly, for covering this important rural Lane County issue!

Seems like, for an agency that "doesn't regulate gravel pits or mines," LRAPA has issued a lot of permits.

Gravel-related air pollution permits are listed on the LRAPA web site for...

<http://www.lrapa.org/208/Ge...>

Aggregate Resource Crushing, LLC
 Coburg Road Quarry, LLC
 Conser Quarry Co.(GMT Corp.)
 Eugene Sand & Gravel (CPM Development Corporation)
 Martin Creek Quarry, Inc.
 McDougal Brothers, Inc. - Plant 1
 Morse Bros., Inc. dba Knife River Eugene Crusher
 Morse Bros., Inc. [Rap]
 Nathan Marple Crushing
 Oakridge Sand & Gravel Inc.
 Portable Rock Production, Crusher 1
 Portable Rock Production, Crusher 2

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