



- Carolyn Sackariason/The Aspen Times

That dust on the snow around Aspen is bad, researchers say

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Correction: There were errors in the original version of this story, which appears below. While oil and gas development and off-road activities are sources of the dust, they are not the only ones. And those soil-destabilizing activities occur on the Colorado Plateau, which includes parts of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico. Colorado Senators Mark Udall and Michael Bennet are co-sponsors of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. The Bureau of Land Management doesn't have any protected wilderness in Southeast Utah.

ASPEN — The red dust blanketing area mountains and virtually every surface in Aspen is a result of oil and gas development and off-road vehicle activity in southeastern Utah, according to David Garbett, staff attorney with Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

He informed the Aspen City Council on Monday of the effects the dust has on the community.

The snow stained by dust melts faster because it absorbs more solar energy, which affects the snowpack in Aspen and surrounding areas.

Garbett said that in 2005 and 2006, dusty snow melted 18 to 35 days earlier in Colorado's San Juan Mountains. Last year, dust-covered snow melted 48 days earlier in the same area, he added.

"Dustier snow has a larger impact than temperatures," he said of the snowpack.

Beyond an expedited snowpack and quicker spring runoff, dust-covered snow affects Aspen's water supply, officials said.

The city's water department has to spend more money in increased treatment chemicals to remove the dust, which resists coagulation. It makes its way through the city's filters and is difficult to remove, according to city officials.

"Water treatment plants in Colorado are experiencing this phenomena throughout areas affected by these storms," wrote Chuck Bailey, the city's water treatment plant supervisor, in an e-mail regarding the issue. "It is usually temporary during spring/summer runoff, but still a new challenge to us."

Destabilization of the soil on the Colorado Plateau in Utah is the primary cause of the local dust storms, contrary to other reports that it's from rockslides in Mexico or weather events as far away as Mongolia, Garbett said.

Garbett and his colleague, Terri Martin, urged the council to support America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, introduced by Colorado Sens. Mark Udall and Michael Bennet, which seeks to protect wilderness areas in Utah from off-road use, oil and gas development and other destabilizing activities.

The Bureau of Land Management and the federal government control the wilderness area on the Colorado Plateau, where the dust is believed to be carried to the Roaring Fork Valley via windstorms.

The BLM recently approved 20,000 miles of off-road vehicles routes on the plateau and made 80 percent of its lands in that area available for oil and gas leasing and development, according to the Alliance.

"Sensitive lands in Utah ought to be protected," Garbett said of the pending wilderness act. "It's the perfect time for the council to weigh in."

Mayor Mick Ireland said the council will consider it.

"I think it's a good idea," he said, adding the dust lining the mountains around Ruedi Reservoir provides a spectacular example of the effects of last week's storm.

"It's unbelievable at Ruedi, it's like 'The Cat in the Hat' ... uniformly pink," Ireland said. "It's beautiful in a sort of a science fiction way. It's bizarre."

Another dust storm was expected to hit the Roaring Fork Valley late Monday night and into Tuesday.

A blowing dust advisory for south-central Colorado and portions of western Colorado was issued by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment on Monday.

A cold front was expected to move across Utah and Arizona, generating strong south-southwesterly winds with gusts potentially reaching 50 mph.

The strong winds were expected to cause blowing dust in parts of Arizona, Utah, New Mexico and Colorado, which could be transported long distances, causing hazy skies and restricted visibility at times even in areas where the winds are lighter.

The state health department warned that the elderly, the young and those with respiratory problems should avoid prolonged exertion and limit outdoor exposure during dust storms.

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