

RapidCityJournal.com

Thursday, March 30, 2006

NEW: City meets EPA air standard for first time

By Scott Aust, Journal Staff Writer

RAPID CITY - Nearly 30 years after first violating federal air quality dust standards, Rapid City is being designated as in compliance with federal EPA standards.

On April 5, the Environmental Protection Agency will officially designate the city as in attainment of the federal national ambient air quality standard for dust particles.

The state Department of Environment and Natural Resources began working with local government and industry officials in 1978 after the first violation of the dust standard was measured.

This is the first time that Rapid City has been declared in attainment, according to Jeni Leberknight, current chairwoman of the Rapid City Area Air Quality Board. The board regulates dust and smoke control efforts in and around the city.

“The entire board is extremely pleased that all those efforts have paid off,” she said. “We’re very excited. It’s a big deal. We’ve been working hard at it for a while now.”

Wind-blown dust from industrial mining operations, construction sites, unpaved roads and tilled fields, as well as smoke from wood burning, have been the biggest sources of the city’s air quality problems over the years.

Rapid City was at risk of being declared a non-attainment area if the state, local governments and industry had not taken steps to improve air quality. Under a non-attainment designation, the federal Clean Air Act authorizes EPA to impose certain sanctions, such as withholding federal highway funds or prohibiting the issuance of air quality permits for new development.

Mayor Jim Shaw said he is pleased that the EPA recognized the cooperative efforts of the city, Pennington County, the state and private industry to improve local air quality.

“The designation recognizes the excellent quality of life enjoyed by Rapid City residents and will support the community's ongoing economic development efforts as we continue to seek to attract high quality businesses and jobs to the Black Hills,” Shaw said.

To remain in attainment, the city must maintain its air quality levels and continue to provide data to EPA, Leberknight said. If the city records a measurement that exceeds standards that can’t be explained by natural events such as high winds, it could be designated as non-attainment.