

Smoke and Visibility In Washington State

By Shirley Clark

The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 set forth a national visibility goal – to prevent future and to remedy existing impairment of visibility in class I areas due to man-made pollution. Three years later, EPA promulgated Visibility Regulations which required states to revise State Implementation Plans (SIPs) for visibility.

The State of Washington had adopted a Smoke Management Plan in the early '70s to deal with health and welfare effects of forest burning. The primary goal of the plan was to keep smoke out of the urban, heavily populated areas, so burns were conducted under wind and weather conditions that forced smoke into the mountainous areas of the state – where the class I areas are located!

State officials believed that smoke from slash burning was affecting visibility throughout the state. After the visibility regulations were finalized, the State was eager to set up a monitoring program. Cooperation between the State and NPS resulted in visibility monitoring in the three class I areas managed by NPS. Photography, particulate monitoring, nephelometer measurements, and visual observations have indicated that smoke from slash burning is affecting visibility in class I areas.

The State held an informational meeting prior to drafting a Visibility SIP. This gave a chance for proponents of both visibility and burning to air their concerns about the plan and its approach. After release of the draft plan, public hearings were held and generally supportive comments were received.

The plan included a tighter scheduling of burning on weekends between July 1 and Labor Day weekend within 60 miles of a class I area. NPS had requested that time period to be emphasized initially because Mount Rainier, North Cascades, and Olympic National Parks receive 50% of annual visitation during that time and entering visitation on weekend days is over twice that on weekdays. A 60-mile buffer area around the three class I areas managed by NPS and the five class I areas managed by USFS encompasses most of western Washington. The restrictions went into effect on July 1, and burning was not allowed on visibility important (according to the weather forecast) weekend days between July 1 and Labor Day weekend within 60 miles of a class I area.

The plan also included a goal by forest managers to reduce total emissions generated by prescribed burning in western Washington 35 percent below current levels by 1990. Ways proposed to achieve this goal include refinement of burning techniques and increased utilization of wood residue.

The plan is viewed by NPS as a good first step toward improving visibility in Mount Rainier, North Cascades, and Olympic National Parks. It appears that a reasonable compromise has been reached among the conflicting interests which the plan covers. NPS will continue to cooperate with the state on monitoring activities as the plan is implemented to document whether or not visibility improves.

Clark is Air and Water Quality Coordinator for the Pacific Northwestern Region, NPS.