

Dust regulations raise questions about water use

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The government's environmental war on dust is forcing Arizona home builders and contractors to use tens of millions of gallons of water each month to spray down work sites.

Federal, state and county air quality regulations require construction sites to control dust levels to help cut down on pollution in the Phoenix area. Home builders and contractors that fail to do so face government fines and sanctions. The result is that many of them continually spray their work sites with

water to curtail the amount of dust released into the air.

That raises questions about the logic of imposing regulations that result in the use of extraordinary amounts of water — a scarce resource in the desert Southwest — to control dust, an unavoidable element in this terrain.

"I see sprinklers going 24 hours a day, watering the desert," Fred Stiles said of some construction sites in the Valley. "Is this a good use of water?"

Stiles is state chairman of the National Association of Industrial & Office Properties and asset manager of EJM Development Co.

Jeff Stone, chief executive of Summit Builders Construction Co., said his company uses as much as 350,000 gallons of water a month on a single construction site to control dust and keep the dirt more compact.

Summit has as many as 25 to 30 projects going at once, which amounts to substantial water usage. "It's pretty amazing," Stone said.

Summit and other builders have been fined by

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government agencies for "fugitive dust" and other such violations. The Phoenix contractor specializes in commercial projects.

Stone said the rules and reality of construction work in the Sonoran Desert result in frequent watering of project sites.

"It's almost constant, at least every couple of hours," Stone said.

Contractors and home builders contacted for this story said watering desert dirt is the primary way of controlling dust. Stone said

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Summit also puts in gravel paths for vehicles and equipment to traverse work sites, but water is the main dust buster.

The water-gobbling rules — which are administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Arizona Department of Environmental Quality and Maricopa County Air Quality Department — are aimed at improving air quality in the Phoenix area. The



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Government air quality rules mandate that home builders and contractors control dust at construction sites or face fines. The result is constant watering of some project sites, using thousands of gallons of water.

EPA requires Maricopa County to lower its air pollution levels by 5 percent a year until it reaches federal benchmarks, or the state could lose as much as \$7.5 billion in federal highway funds.

The state also is expanding its own dust-control rules in a new law signed by Gov. Janet Napolitano. The state law and county rules require contractors and home builders to have personnel go through dust-control training and hire specialized personnel to deal with the pollution problems.

Builders and other entities were fined \$1.9 million during the first half of 2007 for air quality violations in Maricopa County. Most of those fines were related to dust.

The rules require contractors and builders to have water truckers or tankers at project sites so they can water down the dirt. Some of those water trucks are owned by the builders themselves, while others are brought in by subcontractors.

"We have water trucks or water wagons," said Lorraine Bergman, co-owner of Tempe-

based Caliente Construction Inc.

Bergman said her company uses a lot of water to compact dirt and control dust at its construction sites for commercial buildings, banks and retail centers. "It's pretty continuous," she said.

Water supplies are a short- and long-term issue for Arizona, Nevada and other Western states. Major population growth in the Southwest has increased demand, and droughts in recent years have depleted water supplies including the Colorado River.

Erin Bruno, spokeswoman for the Maricopa County Air Quality Department, said there are other ways to control dust, including having construction vehicles drive more slowly. Another method is the use of track-out devices — metal grates that can be laid down on construction sites for personnel and vehicles to traverse.

"We would hope all dust sources use their water wisely," she said.

Bruno said dust is stabilized in natural desert lands because it is covered by brush and crusted over. She said when those lands are dug up, driven over or walked upon, that dust is stirred up.

"We know human activity is a significant cause of our particulate-matter pollution problem," Bruno said.

Business Journal editorial intern **Annalyn Censky** contributed to this story.

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