

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Black carbon is the latest environmental battleground

By Patti Epler

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is being threatened with legal action by environmentalists again, this time over its failure to reduce black carbon that's ends up on sea ice and glaciers.

The Center for Biological Diversity on Wednesday notified EPA of its intent to sue if the agency doesn't start taking some action within 60 days.

Participants at the recent Arctic Council meeting, a gathering of eight Arctic nations in Nuuk, Greenland, identified black carbon emissions in the far North as coming from old diesel engines and woodstoves. The black particles absorb heat and warm the atmosphere while in the air, and then spread over the ice and snow, absorbing heat and increasing melting.

The environmental group called on EPA to take action to reduce and ultimately regulate the particulates in February 2010, but the agency never responded, according to the letter of intent to sue filed Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

Matt Vespa, a senior attorney with the center in San Francisco, said the EPA needs to first identify the problem through monitoring and measuring and then consider ways to reduce the pollutants. In Alaska, he said, local sources tend to be the older diesel engines and cook stoves that burn wood or coal. The problem could be stopped with filters, for instance, that reduce particulate emissions or requiring stoves that use natural gas instead of other fuels, he said.

The group contends the agency is violating the Clean Water Act which is supposed to protect sea ice and glaciers.

"Major cuts in black carbon emissions could slow the effects of climate change for a decade or two, buying policy makers more time to cut carbon dioxide emissions and potentially avoid irreversible effects of global warming," the letter said.

The center says if current trends continue, many of the glaciers in the continental U.S., including all of those in Montana's Glacier National Park, could disappear in the next 30 years. Already sea ice is decreasing in the Arctic and scientists believe the Arctic could be ice free in the summer by 2030, the center says.