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June 24, 2003
Immediate Release

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Environment Department Makes Decision to Combat Regional Haze, Improve Visibility in Wilderness and Park Areas

(Santa Fe, NM) – Building upon the comments of a majority of stakeholders during an extensive public process, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has announced the direction it will take in combating haze and increasing visibility in New Mexico. NMED has chosen to pursue implementation of Section 309 of the federal Regional Haze Rule, the “Western Only” option, rather than the nationally available Section 308.

In 1999, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) promulgated the Regional Haze Rule, a major effort to improve visual air quality in 156 national parks and wilderness areas around the country. New Mexico contains nine of these areas, including Bandelier National Monument, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, and the Gila, Pecos, Wheeler Peak, Salt Creek, White Mountain and San Pedro Parks Wilderness Areas.

“By using the approach developed by westerners, for westerners, NMED will be able to begin working to decrease haze now and not put off tough decisions,” said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. “Section 309 also gives industry and the regulated community a clear picture of where they need to be on reducing haze, while preserving their flexibility on how to get there. This work represents a consensus of industry representatives and environmentalists, as well as federal and state government.”

Among other groups, the Section 309 option has been supported by New Mexico Citizens for Clean Air and Water, the Public Service Company of New Mexico, Phelps Dodge and the National Park Service.

Haze is created by smoke, dust, moisture, and vapor suspended in air and impairs visibility. The term regional haze means haze that impairs visibility in all directions over a large area. Sources hundreds or even thousands of miles away can contribute to visibility problems at remote locations, such as national parks.

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The rule requires states to begin making reasonable progress toward returning visibility in these wilderness and park areas to “natural conditions” by 2064. Average visibility in these areas has decreased from 140 miles in the late 1800’s to 90 miles today.

Section 309 of the federal Regional Haze Rule incorporates the work of the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission (GCVTC). This section also includes strategies for combating regional haze such as reducing smoke, preventing air pollution through energy efficiency, reducing dust from dirt roads, reducing air pollution from industrial sources, reducing pollution from vehicles (mobile sources), and other measures to reduce haze-producing air pollution.

“We feel that building upon the work completed by the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission is what makes the most sense for New Mexico,” said Secretary Curry. “We are looking forward to moving ahead with this plan by the end of the year and improving upon our parks and wilderness areas.”

NMED held 14 meetings in recent months with interested persons to discuss which direction New Mexico should go in implementing the Regional Haze Rule. At the end of the process, thirteen stakeholders recommended the Section 309 (or Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission recommendations) option, one recommended the Section 308 (or national) option, and six were undecided.

A public open house on this issue is planned for this summer. The state implementation plan will be heard in a public hearing before the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Board this fall. As dates for these events become final, more information will be forthcoming. The Department's web site (www.nmenv.state.nm.us) will include updates as well.

For more information contact Jon Goldstein, NMED Communications Director at (505) 827-0314.

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