

## A Day in the Wichitas

With the sun shining brightly, the *Day in the Wichitas: Family Picnic, Fishing and Hiking Event* started with folks mingling, getting reacquainted and meeting new people! On May 22, 2011, Sierra Club members and friends from around the state of Oklahoma met at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge for a day of fishing, hiking, a scrumptious picnic, as well as a discussion of the affects of mercury and other pollutants from coal-fired power plants. The people in attendance, whose ages ranged from 5 to 65, enjoyed a picnic of grass-fed beef burgers from [Rose Ranch](#), pasta salad, and locally made blueberry pie. This was followed by a presentation given by Whitney Pearson, organizer for the Coal-Free Oklahoma Campaign, on the harmful effects of mercury and haze pollution.

The presentation covered the following:

- **According to the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, there are currently 16 lakes in the state with consumption advisories for fish contaminated with mercury.** Three of the lakes are located IN the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge. So unfortunately, some of the fish in these lakes are unsafe to eat in certain amounts.
- **Coal plants are one of the largest sources of man-made mercury pollution in the U.S.** Every year 300,000 infants are born at risk for developmental defects because of their mother's exposure to toxic mercury pollution.
- **This toxic pollution causes serious health problems, including brain damage.** Almost 2/3 of coal-fired plants lack the needed modern pollution controls to keep toxic air pollution, like mercury, acid gases and arsenic, out of our air and water.
- **The EPA has finally proposed long-overdue Clean Air Act standards to protect our communities from the threats of toxic air pollutants like mercury.** There are currently no national standards to limit these pollutants from sources like power plants. Mercury and other pollutants are linked to health problems such as cancer, heart disease, brain damage, birth defects, asthma attacks and premature death. The EPA is currently accepting public comments on their proposed rule. Now is the time to tell the EPA that we want stronger health protections.
- **The Wichita Mountains are also currently facing visibility impairments caused by haze. The pollutants which form haze, like sulfur dioxide, have also been linked to serious health problems and environmental damage.** Exposure to very small particles in the air has been linked with *increased respiratory illness, decreased lung function, and even premature death.* Luckily, the EPA has proposed a Federal Implementation Plan (FIP) to clean up sulfur dioxide pollution from three of Oklahoma's oldest and largest coal plants because Oklahoma's plan did not adequately address Clean Air Act requirements to reduce pollution. EPA has given the dirtiest coal plants in Oklahoma a choice to install emission control technology on three outdated coal plants or switch to natural gas to meet the stricter sulfur dioxide limit. The good news is that scrubbers are effective pollution control devices that reduce sulfur dioxide pollution and other harmful pollutants like mercury. Scrubbers have been used for over 30 years to reduce pollution at coal plants, and they are installed in every new coal plant. Scrubbers are also very cost effective to install on old plants, and are being installed on old plants around the country. The better news is that there are cleaner and cheaper ways to comply with EPA's proposal than installing scrubbers – such as retiring old and dirty coal fired power plants and replacing them with modern renewable energy.

- **There are 18 Coal plants in Texas, and because of their geographic location, they have a negative impact on the air quality in Oklahoma.** There are currently 6 proposed coal plants that, if built, would impact our state's air quality even more. This has environmental implications as well as health and economical. In order to keep Oklahoma's air clean, we must encourage the EPA to stop the permitting and construction of proposed coal fired power plants in Texas by putting a hold on the issuance of new permits until the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality operates in compliance with the Clean Air Act.
- The Sierra Club commissioned an air modeling study that shows current impacts of Texas coal plants on air quality in Oklahoma and the predicted impacts of the proposed coal plants. **The modeling predicted that existing coal plants in Texas cause 254 ozone violations in Oklahoma, and that proposed coal plants would cause 28 more violations.**

The attendees filled out postcards urging the EPA to force coal-fired power plants to clean up toxic mercury pollution. Currently, there are no federal regulations for mercury pollution in the United States, so it is vital to inform the EPA of our concerns.

Following the presentation and the delicious picnic, everyone headed off onto a hiking trail for an exciting and breathtaking view of the Wichitas. A leader of the Friends of the Wichitas, Bobby Williamson, helped the Red Earth Group Outings Leader, Chris Applegate, lead the hike while several group members narrated sightings of plants and animals along the way. After the hike a number of people went kayaking, while others went fly-fishing.

One way that you can help stop mercury pollution is by signing the online [Protect Our Health: Stop Mercury and Other Toxics Petition](#). You can personalize it with your own concerns and stories. Each signature collected adds support and strength to our movement to protect our health and our environment, while putting us one step closer towards a more sustainable, clean energy future.

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