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Current Grand Canyon Resource Issues: Briefing Paper Series

Preserving Crystal Clear Vistas

From the rim of the Grand Canyon at Desert View you can almost see forever on clear days. To the north, beyond the opposite rim, lie the rugged Vermillion Cliffs; to the east the distant Hopi Mesas, to the south, the towering San Francisco peaks. This grand vista, each landmark between 50 and 100 miles distant, is as much a part of the rim experience as the canyon below. But these vistas can no longer be taken for granted, limited much of the time by man-made pollution from a variety of sources.

Each year, millions of people travel to the Canyon to experience solitude and enjoy the spectacular views. Most visitors do not realize that Grand Canyon National Park and the other parks of the Colorado Plateau represent one of the largest clean air reservoirs in the United States. The Plateau, and 16 national parks and wilderness areas within its boundaries, are classified as mandatory Class I airsheds under the 1977 Clean Air Act. The Act mandates that no deterioration occur within these airsheds.

Despite these designations, air quality has declined. Visibility is one-half to two-thirds what it would be under natural conditions and the distant views at Grand Canyon are noticeably impaired 90% of the time. But the solution is difficult because most of the pollution originates far from the parks, air has no boundaries. As part of the 1990 Clean Air Act, Congress created the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission to examine solutions to this regional problem. The non-partisan Commission issued its report in June 1996, a mix of long-range recommendations for improving visibility. Its recommendations could significantly improve and preserve the region's pristine air, generating jobs, all for about \$10 per person annually through 2040. The task now is to implement these ambitious goals.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Canyon and other parks on the Colorado Plateau enjoy some of the clearest air in the nation. From the canyon rim vistas stretch out 100 miles and sometimes farther. These were designated "mandatory Class 1" airspaces by the 1977 Clean Air Act. That Act declared, as a national goal, "the prevention of any future, and the remedying of any existing impairment of visibility in mandatory Class I areas" where the impairment is man-made air pollution. But the vistas of Grand Canyon and the other parks of the plateau are less than half what they would be without man-made air pollution. Congress directed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to write regulations to assure "reasonable progress" and a "long-term strategy" toward meeting the national goal.

Eighteen years later, our nation has failed to develop either a long-term strategy or to make reasonable progress in meeting the national goal of preventing and remedying visibility impairment in any of the United States' 158 Class I areas. In fact, it will be 1999 before the EPA fully implements its

first regulatory action for the sole purpose of improving visibility under the 1977 Clean Air Act—installing scrubbers on Navajo Generating station.

Responding to this dismal record, Congress, in 1990, strengthened the visibility section of the Clean Air Act and established the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission. The Commission was charged with the task of undertaking a precedent-setting process for improving visibility at the 16 Class I areas located on the Colorado Plateau—a goal that has eluded federal and state agencies for almost two decades. Actions taken by this Commission will establish a model for other, future visibility commissions to follow in protecting visibility in parks throughout the nation.

GRAND CANYON VISIBILITY TRANSPORT COMMISSION

In November 1991, the administrator of the EPA established the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission

(GCVTC). The transport region is made up of nine western states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. The Commission is made up of the governors of these states or their designees, five tribal leaders (Hopi, Navajo, Acoma, Hualapai, and Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission), and ex-officio, non-voting members from the U. S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the EPA. Utility companies, mining and smelting companies, state and county development districts, and environmentalists, including Grand Canyon Trust and Grand Canyon River Guides, all participate in the process.

The Commission released its recommendations early this summer. Solutions include changes in the utility and transportation industries, shifts to cleaner, renewable energies, and increased monitoring of air resources. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has 18 months to formulate regulations based on the recommendations of the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission. Although EPA is not bound by GCVTC recommendations, these regulations will likely reflect the non-partisan work of the commission. But the implementation and impact of these recommendations will take years.

THE NEXT STEP

Because air pollution is a regional problem, solutions lie far beyond the park's boundaries. The Trust is working to assure

GCVTC RECOMMENDATION HIGHLIGHTS

- An electric utilities agreement to reduce emissions by 70% by 2040, with the establishment of a trigger beginning in 2000 for a regulatory program should they fail to meet their projected emission reductions;
- Support for the transition to renewable power production, including solar, wind, biomass, and geothermal, on the order of 10% by 2005 and 20 % by 2015;
- Support for adoption of nationwide Low Emission Vehicle standards beginning in 2001 and the development of more stringent emission standards for heavy-duty vehicles;
- Recognizing the need for funding improved monitoring and development of an emissions inventory on tribal lands on the Colorado Plateau;
- Proposing the reinstatement of incentives for constructing energy-efficient residential and commercial structures similar to those in place during the 1970's.

the installation of "best available technology" to control emissions at the Mohave Generating Plant which lies upwind of the Canyon. The impacts and sources of pollution are complex and little-known. There is a pressing need for more monitoring, greater understanding of the sources of pollution, and more efforts like the GCVTC to oversee and coordinate the regional effort. No single entity can do it alone: it will take an effort from all of us.

WHAT GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK IS DOING:

- Bicycles, walking or mass transit encouraged at the West Rim Drive;
- Buses are no longer allowed to idle while waiting at rim overlooks;
- Recycling is encouraged throughout the park;
- In the future most park visitors will move around the park in a low or no emission transit system.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Support the recommendations of the GCVTC by writing to your Congressional representative.

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20215

U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20210

Tell them clear air at Grand Canyon and the Colorado Plateau is important to you and ask that Congress provide adequate funding to the EPA for:

- An improved monitoring program;
- An up-to-date & accurate inventory of pollution sources for the region; and
- A group to oversee & coordinate a successful interstate visibility program.