

Smelter Talk Proves Need For Tough 'Clean Air' Law

What would happen to this city's atmosphere if a copper smelter operated just across the Santa Cruz County line, about 25 miles south of Tucson?

Tucsonians had a chance to speculate about that for three days last week, and they faced the prospect with understandable concern. Then, suddenly, the rising fears were allayed when J. B. Knaebel, a vice president of the Anaconda Company, stated emphatically that his firm had "no intention whatsoever of building a copper smelter in either Pima County or Santa Cruz County."

That announcement brought welcome relief. Operation of a smelter south of the city would be no less than an "air pollution disaster" for Tucson, according to Dr. James E. McDonald, senior physicist at the University of Arizona Institute of Atmospheric Physics.

The speculation started when D. J. Baffert, a member of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, recently invited Anaconda to build a smelter near its new mining property at Twin Buttes. He reasoned that increased mining activity in this area will create a need for a smelter, and that location of the smelter in Santa Cruz should make it possible to cut that county's property tax rate.

From one viewpoint, this shows a commendable concern for taxpayers within his jurisdiction, but Mr. Baffert took the trophy for social irresponsibility when he said:

"I don't know much about smelters, but smoke wouldn't make any difference anyway because there aren't many people living in the Twin Buttes area."

It would make a big difference to 325,000 people in Tucson. Take Dr. McDonald's scientific word for it. He explained that, with a smelter operating south of the city, the morning winds "would bring smelter smoke and sulphur dioxide gases into the Tucson metropolitan area in completely intolerable concentrations virtually every day."

And there wouldn't be a thing that the officials of Tucson or Pima County could do about it. The state's air pollution law merely authorizes a Board of Supervisors to pass ordinances regulating sources of pollution within its own county.

That law is not adequate. The smelter at San Manuel in Pinal County, for example, sometimes sends its smog to Tucson, more often to Phoenix. But the people in the affected areas and their elected officials are powerless to remedy the situation.

Increased mining activity in this part of Arizona will contribute importantly to the Tucson economy, and that is all to the good. But who can say now with certainty whether mining activity near here will be greater or smaller in 20 years than it is now?

And who can be sure now that some company may not believe it economically essential to build a smelter near Tucson in 10 years or in 20 years?

We accept Anaconda's assurance in good faith, but we know that the personnel, problems and policies of any firm must, of necessity, change over the years.

The only way to keep Arizona air clean for all Arizonans is for the Legislature to pass a strong state law, one which the attorney general can enforce to control sources of pollution regardless of the county in which they are located.

Arizona can prevent serious air pollution if that law is passed soon enough. Cleaning polluted air, after the problem gets really bad, is virtually impossible.