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Clean Air Excellence Award given to LRAPA Director for work on benzene-in-gas rule

Persistence and teamwork were recognized when Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 10 presented Merlyn Hough, director of The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency (LRAPA), the Clean Air Excellence Award. The award, presented at the 2008 Air Toxics summit in Boise, Idaho, recognizes efforts to reduce exposure to toxic air emissions and protect public health. The award was given for Hough's work with Pacific Northwest Air Directors to strengthen the EPA Mobile Source Air Toxics Rule in order to reduce benzene levels in gasoline sold in the Pacific Northwest.

"This award is really for a group effort," says Hough. "I recognize the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency (PSCAA), the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ), and U.S. Senator Ron Wyden's office as the heavy lifters who dedicated their efforts to bring about significant changes to the EPA benzene-in-gas rule."

Gasoline in the Pacific Northwest is refined from crude oil originating from Alaska, which has a naturally higher benzene content. EPA's original proposal to lower the benzene content-in-gas standard would have left Pacific Northwest gas with a benzene content as much as twice the national average. Benzene is a significant air toxic and a known carcinogen. Under the new rule, benzene levels in gas sold in the Pacific Northwest will be reduced starting in 2012.

The benzene issue came to light when Diane Dietz of the Eugene Register Guard wrote a story based on a discussion at a LRAPA Board of Director's meeting. A subsequent Register Guard editorial and Oregonian feature story caught the attention of Senator Wyden's office. Senator Wyden put a hold on the nominated EPA chief counsel until the EPA agreed to a more protective national benzene-in-gas standard. Testimony from LRAPA, Dennis McLerran of PSCAA, Andy Ginsburg of ODEQ and technical analysis done by Kathy Himes of PSCAA helped influence the EPA decision.

"This collaboration of local and state agencies working together with the media and elected officials is an example of an effective approach to address air quality challenges. This successful effort will provide dramatic air quality benefits for the Pacific Northwest," said Hough.