# The limits of growth

Last year, the American Lung Association declared that the air quality in Box Elder, Cache, Davis, Salt Lake, Uintah, Utah and Weber counties was unacceptable. If you ventured outside in December, January, or February you understand this assessment. The air quality along the Wasatch Front is pathetic.

Given that the Utah Legislature is now in session, a number of groups are lobbying to improve Utah's air quality. Among the many policy measures being put forth are increased use of mass transit, ordinances to restrict the idling of car engines, and limiting the burning of wood during winter months.

All of these measures involve reducing the amount of carbon consumed by the average Utahn, something that has come to be known as a "carbon footprint." These ideas have merit and should certainly be considered. Taking these steps would have an immediate and positive impact on Utah's air quality.

Further, there is clearly room for Americans, including Utahns, to significantly reduce the amount of carbon consumed. The journalist Fred Pearce finds that the carbon footprint of the average American is four times greater than a resident of China, 20 times greater than a citizen of Indian, and 40 times greater than those living in Nigeria.

Yet, in the long run, reducing the average Utahn's carbon consumption will not be enough to clear the air. Consider that even though per capita consumption of carbon in the countries mentioned above is far less than in the United States, each of these countries has a serious air pollution problem. The World Health organization estimates that the air quality in Beijing, China and Lagos, Nigeria is five times worse than Los Angeles. In Delhi, India, where only 9 percent of the population owns an automobile, air quality is 8 times worse than Los Angeles.

The total amount of carbon used in a region is a function of two variables. The first is per capita carbon consumption, and the second is the number of people in the region. Even though per capita carbon consumption in China is far less than the United States, China's total carbon emissions are 29 percent greater than those of the United States because China's population is larger.

The population variable is especially important for Utah because the vast majority of the state's population is concentrated in a relatively small space bounded by the Wasatch Mountains on the east and the Great Salt Lake on the west.

In less than 50 years, the number of people living along the Wasatch Front will more than double. This growth will exacerbate the problem of air quality and compound a myriad of other issues ranging from open space to transportation to water. Moreover, polices that influence population growth are inherently long-run policies. Policies cannot influence a region's population growth in a month or a year.

For that reason, now is a good time to start considering future population growth in Utah. Utah needs to move away from an environment that encourages unchecked population growth and unplanned development.

If the state doesn't take steps to do so, at some point in the future Utahns will long for the clean air of the winter of 2013.

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**Top of Utah Voices**

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**Commentary**

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