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AIR QUALITY NEWS

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NEW HIGH-RES WEB CAMS SHOW AIR POLLUTION THAT OBSCURES SCENIC VISTAS, POSES HEALTH RISKS

MILTON, Mass. – On the eve of an annual open house at Blue Hill Observatory (BHO), the oldest continuously operating weather station in North America, state and regional air quality officials today unveiled new high-resolution digital cameras there aimed at letting Massachusetts residents and visitors know when air pollution is spoiling scenic views and making it harder to breathe.

“What the new cameras show us more clearly than ever before is a problem known as ‘regional haze,’” said Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Roy Herzfelder. “Massachusetts is working closely with other states, federal agencies, and tribal governments to address this problem, which threatens not only the natural resources around us, but also our health.”

The new Web cams are part of CAMNET (<http://www.hazecam.net>), an online network that uses digital cameras to monitor air pollution and visibility at scenic urban and rural locations across the Northeast. Visitors to the CAMNET Web site can view high quality still images refreshed every 15 minutes along with air pollution and weather data that is updated hourly.

“In an age when people communicate, learn, shop, and even date online, there may be no better way to raise awareness about the effects of air pollution than by letting people see it on the Web,” said Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Commissioner Robert W. Gollidge, Jr. “We want people to understand not only that air pollution can obscure an otherwise beautiful view, but also that they could be – and in many cases already are – breathing this stuff.”

Originally launched in 1999 and partially funded by DEP and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), CAMNET is a program of NESCAUM, the Clean Air Association of the Northeast States: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont.

“The new high-resolution cameras at our two Boston area sites – here at Blue Hill and on the North Shore – allow for a 120-degree range of view, which is four times wider than what we could show with our original cameras,” said NESCAUM Senior Scientist George Allen. “People can now literally see the ‘big picture’ when it comes to air quality.”

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Fine particle pollution comes from all types of combustion – motor vehicles, power plants and wood burning, for example – and when it mixes with dust, smoke and moisture in the air, it results in regional haze that limits how far people can see and obscures the color and clarity of their view.

Unlike ground-level ozone (smog), which is primarily a summertime problem, regional haze (<http://www.mass.gov/dep/bwp/daqc/haze.htm>) can occur at any time of year. It can be localized, taking the form of a gray layer in the sky over an urban area, or persist over a much wider geographic region.

Some of the pollutants associated with regional haze also have been linked with serious health problems:

- Fine particles can be deposited deep into the lungs, where they can accumulate on the surface or be absorbed by underlying tissue and enter the bloodstream.
- People with heart or lung diseases and respiratory conditions such as coronary artery disease, congestive heart failure, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are at increased risk of serious effects because particles can aggravate these diseases.
- Children are at risk from breathing fine particles because their lungs are still developing, they are more physically active than many adults, and they are more likely to have asthma or acute respiratory diseases.
- Even healthy people may experience temporary symptoms from exposure to elevated levels of particulate pollution. Symptoms may include: eye, nose and throat irritation, coughing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath.

For more than a decade, Massachusetts has been among a handful of states driving regional and national improvements in air quality. DEP has required cleaner vehicles and fuels, and more stringently regulated combustion facilities and power plants. The agency continues to push for tighter controls on facilities to the south and west whose air pollution is carried by winds aloft to Massachusetts and other Northeast states.

DEP provides a daily air quality forecast at <http://www.mass.gov/air>. Ground-level ozone levels are forecast from May through September, and fine particle concentrations are forecast year-round. Forecasts are based on ozone monitoring at 15 sites across the state and fine particle monitoring at six sites: Blue Hill, Boston, Fall River, Haverhill, Springfield and Worcester.

“Blue Hill Observatory is proud to have been chosen as a strategic site for the haze cams and to add air quality monitoring to its 120-year study of atmospheric science,” said Executive Director Charles Orloff.

Founded in 1885 as a private weather observatory for the study and measurement of the atmosphere, BHO today is a National Historic Landmark and home to the oldest continuously maintained climate records in North America. It recently established a Science Center to increase public understanding of, and appreciation for, atmospheric science. BHO is operated by a private foundation and relies largely on membership dues for financial support, although a 1990s expansion and renovation of the facility was supported by state grants.

The Observatory’s annual open house is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, April 30. During the event, visitors will be able to see the new Web cameras and learn more about DEP air pollution monitoring at the site.

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