

# Deseret News

## As another inversion creeps in, let's look for real solutions

By [Jay Evensen](#)

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The good news is you can fill up your car with pocket change. The bad news is cheap gas couldn't have come at a worse time in northern Utah.

“People don't like government telling them what to do. They will, however, react to incentives.”

People along the Wasatch Front are facing the classic good-news, bad-news situation.

The good news is you can fill up your car with pocket change. The luckiest among you have paid for yearly memberships in big-box retailers such as Costco or Sam's Club. Some of those places were offering regular unleaded for \$1.75 a gallon earlier this week. That's the equivalent of about 25 cents in 1965 dollars, which evokes warm, fuzzy memories of tail fins and chrome doodads among people my age.

Now for the bad news: It couldn't come at a worse time.

Carl Sandburg described fog as coming in “on little cat feet.” But Utah's haze comes in like a cat with no regard for a litter box, who soils your home and likes to sleep on your face, making it hard for you to breathe.

The state has proposed a [permanent winter-long ban](#) on wood burning in counties that have the worst problem. Such a ban is temporarily in place right now as long as the current inversion lasts. Experts say burning wood in a fireplace is about as bad for the air as driving a car 1,150 miles.

By all means, keep the fireplaces cold. Other than enduring the uncomfortable irony of having to explain this to those who took [federal incentives](#) to retrofit their stoves and fireplaces to burn cleaner, it's a move that makes sense. But it solves only part of the problem. The state has to do something about all the cars.

So far, the state is merely asking people to limit their driving and to carpool or take mass transit. Pretty please? The problem is, the market, with its low gas prices, is sending out a different message.

People don't like government telling them what to do. They will, however, react to incentives. Several years ago I met with Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, who convinced me of the power of congestion pricing.

Traffic congestion, he said, comes with a cost in time and money. Our behavior would change if government put a premium on driving during peak hours.

Utah already has one tentative toe dipped into these waters. The car-pool lanes on major Wasatch Front freeways allow single-occupant cars access for a price, and that price fluctuates as a variable toll depending on traffic and air quality conditions. But the concept won't really work until the toll covers all lanes at all times.

O'Toole said studies show at least two-thirds of rush-hour drivers don't absolutely have to be on the road right then. If the price were high enough, they would choose to take their trips some other time. The result would be less traffic, less idling and fewer toxic emissions. Those who had to drive but felt the price was too high could resort to mass transit or ride sharing.

To make this concept more palatable, the state should either greatly reduce or completely eliminate its portion of the gasoline tax, which is an ineffective way to fund road repairs.

The state may need federal permission to toll an existing interstate highway. But with Republicans ruling the roost, Washington may be a friendly place for Utah and its requests.

At times like this I am reminded of the Broadway musical "The Act" and its song, "City Lights." The lyrics say, "Country air means zilch to me, I won't breathe nothing I can't see."

Liza Minnelli sang that as part of the original cast. She might have had a hard time belting it out along the Wasatch Front during an inversion, however. And even a trip to the country, say, Cache Valley, wouldn't have helped much.

Utah's northern valleys suffer from unfortunate geographic realities that lend themselves to inversions. Newspaper archives are filled with concerns about smog dating to the 19th century. It may be impossible to avoid hazy days, but it shouldn't be impossible to make them less toxic.

We just have to think a little differently than in the past. My guess is the 4,000 people who rallied for clean air at the state Capitol a year ago would appreciate that. So would the rest of us, cheap gas or not.