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Gray Wall Dims Hopes of 'Green' Games

China Has Vowed to Curb Pollution Before '08 Olympics, but Its Secrecy Is Feeding Skepticism

By Maureen Fan
Washington Post Foreign Service
Tuesday, October 16, 2007

BEIJING -- In summer, a gray industrial haze coats this city of more than 15 million, descending over the Great Wall, sticking to humid hillsides and obscuring skyscrapers. Soaring temperatures and a lack of wind conspire with gunk-spewing traffic to foul the air.

The pollution is so bad many visitors are wondering how Olympic athletes will be affected and how this city can possibly be ready to host them in less than 10 months.

Beijing officials preparing for the Games point proudly to a state-of-the-art control room that measures pollutants at 27 monitoring stations around the city. They say they are adding subway lines and have moved many factories out of town. And in a four-day experiment in August that could be a model for action during the Games, officials eliminated more than a million cars from the city's streets by ordering motorists with odd- and even-numbered license plates to drive on alternate days.

But critics point to evidence of their own: Beijing does not regularly measure or evaluate some serious pollutants, including ozone and some types of fine particulate matter that can easily be inhaled deep into the lungs. Meanwhile, they have refused to publicly

release figures on the amount of pollutants at any given location, such as the Olympic Village or Tiananmen Square, preferring to stick with a citywide average.

[China](#) has promised a "green" Olympics, but its failure to divulge what is actually in the host city's air has alarmed athletes, surprised environmental experts and raised questions about officials' commitment to making needed changes.

Australian athletes have announced they will arrive in Beijing as late as possible because of concerns that the air quality might hinder their performance. Two weeks ago, two Ethiopian middle-distance running champions announced they would forgo some events because of the "disgusting weather and air pollution." New Zealand and American athletes say they will wear face masks if necessary. Even Jacques Rogge, president of the International Olympic Committee, warned that some endurance sports might be postponed if the pollution gets too bad.

Initially, Beijing planned a large-scale anti-pollution experiment in August in which authorities would shut down factories in and outside the city to better assess next summer's needs. There were also promises to work with surrounding provinces that contribute heavily to pollution in the capital, experts said.



Bikers wait at a light in Beijing last month as smog shrouds buildings a block away. Environmentalists and experts fear the city will be unfit to host next year's Olympics. (By Shuji Kajiyama -- Associated Press)

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But now there are indications such pledges will not be carried out. Liu Qi, head of China's Olympic organizing committee, told the Financial Times last month that factories would not be asked to close. And while Chinese news media have since reported that such a measure is being considered, skepticism remains.

"Some factory managers are refusing to close down for the Olympics, arguing that they are willing to slow, but not halt production," said Elizabeth C. Economy, director of Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of a book on China's environment, "The River Runs Black."

State media reports said Hebei province, which surrounds Beijing, will tighten its monitoring of pollutants and begin to measure ozone. But Xu Junhua, deputy director of the information office of Hebei's environmental protection bureau, said state officials had not contacted Hebei about any such plan.

"We have no idea of the details, like where to put the monitoring equipment, how to monitor the extra pollutants, how to collect data and how to publish it," Xu said. "We are waiting for the guidance of the central government."

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Officials with China's State Environmental Protection Administration declined requests for interviews.

The lack of transparency and China's failure to take more stringent measures are worrying environmental activists. Economy said there appears to be a reluctance to do anything that would hinder the country's galloping economic growth.

"I think it is a striking indication of just how deeply capitalism, or perhaps individualism, has permeated China that some people would put profit before national pride," Economy said.

China is trying hard to ensure that it is seen as a modern, technologically advanced and open country during the Games. Beijing residents are famously proud of their home town; many activists who normally oppose the government are loath to use such an important moment to embarrass the country.

But hosting the Olympics is a huge undertaking. Communist Party authorities have issued self-conscious slogans declaring that China is ready to welcome the world, but have registered shock when human rights activists raised political concerns that the government here sees as immaterial to a sporting event. The pressure to deliver a safe and secure event, in which athletes don't keel over because of health problems, is enormous.

For now, Beijing officials are playing down worries about pollution and asking visitors to trust them. After all, they note, the 1984 Olympics went off smoothly in Los Angeles, where pollution at the time was worse than it is today.

Joe Cassmassi, a meteorologist who helped monitor and forecast air pollution during the L.A. Games, said organizers managed to substantially reduce traffic at the time, thus easing concerns about air quality. But he suggested that Beijing could do even better.

"We could only ask for people's cooperation," he said. "China has a lot more control over sources of manufacturing. You're dealing with a country that has a little bit more authoritarian capability."

Critics say that it's clear Beijing is not using all the tools at its disposal. Ozone, a colorless gas and critical pollutant arising in large part from car exhaust and factory emissions, regularly goes unmeasured, even though more than 1,000 new cars take to the capital's streets each day.

Beijing also fails to monitor certain kinds of particulate matter. Authorities regularly track what is known as PM 10, particulate matter with an average diameter of 10 micrometers, but not PM 2.5, smaller particles that are far more dangerous and can trigger asthmatic problems. PM 2.5 has been the standard measurement in the United States for a decade.

Studies have shown that average concentrations of the larger pollutant, PM 10, often exceed China's own national standards. Concentrations of the less frequently monitored



Bikers wait at a light in Beijing last month as smog shrouds buildings a block away. Environmentalists and experts fear the city will be unfit to host next year's Olympics. (By Shuji Kajiyama -- Associated Press)

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Beijing has also refused to release details on the actual amount of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, ozone or particulate matter in the air during the August driving ban. Those individual components are important because they can have acute as well as chronic effects on people's health.

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For athletes unaccustomed to Beijing's pollution, the assault can feel like "an invisible wet rag that chokes your lungs," Cassmassi said. "Eventually you acclimatize yourself, but a lot of people are going there and all of a sudden they're hit with pollutants they're not used to."

"Carbon monoxide replaces oxygen in the bloodstream and reduces the body's ability to oxygenate its tissue," said James M. Lents, a former top executive of air pollution control programs in Los Angeles and Colorado. Ozone and sulfur dioxide attack tissue in the airways, hampering breathing and the processing of oxygen.

Even Chinese researchers have complained about the overly general pollution data, saying they are forced to purchase more specific information from various jurisdictions.

"We have been trying to get more detailed statistics on deaths from respiratory disease from the health department and pollutant concentration from the environmental department, but it's just too hard to get it," said Pan Xiaochuan, a Beijing University medical school professor studying the effect of inhalable particles on respiratory systems and death rates. "It has been secret information for the departments."

Chinese officials prefer to publish a citywide average for pollutants, arguing that readings from one location lack context. But averages tell nothing about pollution in a specific part of a city, analysts say.

What the government does measure, and is fond of citing, are "blue sky days," which its own environmental scientists concede are of no use when trying to actually measure pollution. "Blue sky days can't be considered a serious scientific notion," said Du Shaoyong, deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau. "It's just a saying that is understandable to the media and the public."

China has no national standard for evaluating ozone, Du said, because the explosion in the number of cars has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Its focus on sulfur dioxide follows years of burning coal.

"We promised for the Olympics that we will closely monitor carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and particulate matter. Of course, considering that ozone is important to people's health, we are also watching it," he said. "But the formation of ozone needs special conditions, like enough light, humidity and temperature, so once we can control one condition, we can control the ozone."

Some analysts express hope that a new environmental information law meant to take effect next year will help.

"What's going on now is a complex negotiation among those who share the Beijing airshed," said Deborah Seligsohn, who monitors energy and pollution issues in China for the Washington-based World Resources Institute.



Bikers wait at a light in Beijing last month as smog shrouds buildings a block away. Environmentalists and experts fear the city will be unfit to host next year's Olympics. (By Shuji Kajiyama -- Associated Press)

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"In the last year, the Chinese have put continuous monitoring equipment on power plants of 25 megawatts or more, which is a huge improvement," Seligsohn said. "There's a lot of work to be done. They're moving forward on many fronts at the same time, some of which will bear fruit by the Olympics and some of which won't."

News researcher Li Jie contributed to this report.

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