

Alert

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Alert is a monthly update on transportation and air quality planning activities in the Delaware Valley.

Health and Air Quality

Greater Philadelphia Region Listed in Top 25 Worst Regions in the Nation for Poor Air Quality

The Philadelphia-Reading-Camden PA-NJ-DE-MD metropolitan region¹ has been ranked in the top 25 most polluted regions for ground-level ozone and annual fine particles (PM_{2.5}) by the American Lung Association (ALA) in their State of the Air report released in April 2020. The region was ranked as the 12th worst region for long-term (annual average) PM_{2.5} and 23rd for ozone pollution. The ALA used quality-assured data for the period 2016 to 2018 to develop the 2020 report card on ozone and particle pollution for the nation's cities and counties.

The report also ranks individual counties based on the number of days that air quality reaches unhealthy levels (Code Orange and above) on the Air Quality Index. All eight counties in the DVRPC region that were graded, received a grade of "F" for ozone pollution. Burlington County does not have an air quality monitor and was not graded in this report. Despite being ranked the 12th worst metro region in the nation for annual particle pollution, all of the counties in the DVRPC region that were graded, received passing grades for PM_{2.5} pollution. The region showed higher levels of particle pollution from previous State of the Air reports, moving to 12th on the list from 18th in 2019.

The ALA used the PM_{2.5} daily standard of 35mg/m³, adopted in September 2006; the PM_{2.5} annual standard of 12mg/m³, adopted in September 2012; and the ozone standard of 70 parts per billion, adopted in October 2015, to determine the unhealthy ranges for particle pollution and ozone.

Although the number of high ozone days in the Greater Philadelphia region declined in this reporting period, the ALA claims that 14 of the top 25 most polluted cities for ozone experienced more unhealthy air quality days in this report than in the 2018 report. The Greater Philadelphia region did experience higher levels of annual PM_{2.5} pollution during this study period even while national levels of annual PM_{2.5} pollution continue to decline.

One factor that is contributing to the increase in unhealthy ozone days nationally is rising temperatures. The years 2016-2018 were three of the top-five hottest years on record. Sunlight and elevated temperatures provide energy that drives the chemical reaction that forms ground-level ozone from pollutants.

Wildfires accounted for spikes in short term particle pollution across the nation. The conditions that promote wildfires, particularly drought and higher temperatures, are another reason why the ALA lists climate change as a major risk factor for worsening air quality.



Save the Date

Wednesday
June 17, 2020

2:00 PM and 7:00 PM
Virtual Public Meeting for
Connections 2045 Plan, FY
2021 TIP for PA, and
Conformity

For information on joining
the meeting, please visit:
www.dvrpc.org/calendar

Friday
August 21, 2020
Application Deadline for
DVRPC Congestion
Mitigation and Air Quality
(CMAQ) Program in NJ

For information on the
funding program, please
visit:
www.dvrpc.org/cmaq

The ALA projects that proposed revisions to loosen regulations for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, cleaner power plants, and more fuel efficient vehicles will exacerbate the impacts of climate change on air quality while weakening existing efforts to cut air pollution.

The report does credit the Clean Air Act's science-based regulations with drastically improving the nation's air quality since 1970 but advocates for stronger action to improve the air in regions that still do not meet the federal health-based air quality standards.

The US Environmental Protection Agency has responded that the ALA methodology paints an overly pessimistic picture of progress towards improving air quality in the nation and touts the progress achieved under the Clean Act.

To view the entire 2020 State of the Air report, including grading methodology and statistical analysis, please visit the American Lung Association at: www.stateoftheair.org

¹ The Philadelphia-Reading-Camden PA-NJ-DE-MD metropolitan region includes Philadelphia, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Berks Counties in PA; Camden, Burlington, Gloucester, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem Counties in NJ; New Castle and Kent Counties in Delaware; and Cecil County in Maryland.

Air Quality Partnership

May Kicks Off the Beginning of Greater Philadelphia's Ozone Season

Every year on May 1, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Pennsylvania and New Jersey Departments of Environmental Protection (DEPs), and DVRPC's Air Quality Partnership begin providing daily ground-level ozone forecasts to the public.

Late spring through summer (May through September) is generally when the Greater Philadelphia region experiences the poorest air quality of the year. The region's leading air pollutant is ground-level ozone, also known as smog, which results from the energy from summertime sunlight "baking" pollutants from sources like cars, trucks, and power plants into smog.

The purpose of the air quality forecasts is two-fold: 1) to alert people that ground-level ozone can pose a significant public health risk, especially for people who suffer from respiratory problems, and 2) to encourage the public to take individual actions to help reduce the emissions that contribute to air pollution on days when poor air quality is predicted.

Poor air quality affects everyone, but some people are particularly sensitive to air pollutants, including people who are active outdoors, and people with respiratory diseases such as asthma. When air quality is predicted to be unhealthy for sensitive groups (Code Orange or worse on the Air Quality Index), EPA and the States will announce an air quality alert for the affected areas. EPA and the Center for Disease Control recommend that people in these areas limit strenuous outdoor activity.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to protect the public's lung health. Fortunately, the tools to help the public be aware of poor air quality days are well established and easily accessible.

Free air quality alerts are available through DVRPC's Air Quality Partnership website (www.AirQualityPartnership.org) or the EPA's www.EnviroFlash.info website. Individuals and organizations can sign up for this free email or text message service simply by providing an email address and zip code. DVRPC can share the air quality forecast graphic with planning partners who are interested in hosting the information on their websites. This information is updated automatically by the EPA.

Recipients can expect between 10 and 25 alert days per summer. Fine particle pollution (PM_{2.5}) forecasts are also available year-round, although the region experiences just a few wintertime PM_{2.5} episodes each year.

For more information about the Air Quality Partnership or air quality forecasts, please email Sean Greene, Manager of Air Quality Programs, at sgreene@dvrpc.org.



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