

CLEARING THE AIR:

EPA MUST PROTECT AMERICANS FROM SMOG POLLUTION



Photo by Chris Jordan-Bloch

Ground-level ozone is one of the most widespread air pollutants and is a major component of smog.

Breathing in unsafe levels of ozone pollution can be dangerous, and even deadly. It triggers asthma attacks and can make breathing difficult even for healthy adults. It is linked to lung and heart disease, and is responsible for thousands of premature deaths and millions of days of missed work and school each year. While progress has been made and the Clean Air Act is working to reduce dangerous air emissions, according to the American Lung Association's 2018 State of the Air Report, approximately 133 million people—or 4 in 10 Americans—live in counties where they are exposed to dirty and unsafe levels of air pollution.

Ground-level ozone, not to be confused with the protective ozone layer in the Earth's stratosphere, is a result of burning fossil fuels and other industrial processes. Emissions from these activities react in the atmosphere with light to form ozone, especially when there are warmer temperatures. Increased temperatures and heat waves from climate change will compound the situation in many areas and make it even harder to reduce ozone pollution. Further, ozone is itself a greenhouse gas, too.

The Clean Air Act requires the Environmental Protection Agency to develop limits on the amount of ozone pollution allowed in the air people breathe.

It must do so by evaluating the best and latest science on the impacts of ozone pollution on public health. Independent advisors on EPA's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee assess the latest peer-reviewed research and provide recommendations. According to the Clean Air Act, the standard must be set at a level necessary to protect public health—including sensitive populations—with an “adequate margin of safety.” 42 U.S.C. § 7409(b)(1). Once the standards are in place, the Clean Air Act provides a flexible and cooperative framework in which states create plans to determine how they will reduce pollution to come into compliance with the standards. If a state needs more time, it can get it.

In 2015, responding to an overwhelming body of evidence demonstrating that the previous standard was not protective of public health, the Environmental Protection Agency strengthened the ozone standard to 70 parts per billion (ppb). While the agency would have been justified in setting an even stronger standard, this action was a step in the right direction that will better protect millions of Americans from dangerous smog pollution when it is implemented.

The EPA estimates that once the stronger ozone standard is met it will prevent 230,000 asthma attacks in children and 188,000 missed school and

work days each year, not including the benefits in California. These avoided asthma attacks, missed work and school days, saved lives, and other health benefits will save Americans billions each year in healthcare costs.

The Clean Air Act has a proven track record of success, clearing up six common air pollutants by 70% while the US economy has more than tripled since 1970. Additionally, other existing and proposed Clean Air Act protections (including the Mercury and Air Toxics Standard, the Regional Haze Rule, the Cross State Air Pollution Rule, and Tier III Tailpipe Emissions Standards) will work together to lower emissions and ease compliance. EPA projected that these measures, along with the Clean Power Plan, would allow the vast majority of areas to meet the new ozone limit by 2025.

GROUPS THAT SUPPORT STRONG OZONE PROTECTIONS

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation
- American College of Preventative Medicine
- American Heart Association
- American Lung Association
- American Public Health Association
- American Thoracic Society
- Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
- National Association of County and City Health Officials
- National Environmental Health Association
- National Home Oxygen Patients Association
- Physicians for Social Responsibility
- Trust for America's Health

GROUPS MOST AT RISK FROM SMOG

Children suffer disproportionately from ozone-related health issues due to the greater time they spend playing outdoors and their developing lungs. Unfortunately, asthma rates are increasing every year in the United States. Approximately 1 in 10



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children have asthma. Communities of color and low income families are significantly over-represented in areas with unsafe air and suffer disproportionately. Approximately 1 in 6 Black children have asthma, and Black children saw the greatest rise in asthma rates nationally of any group.

Other vulnerable populations include seniors, people with existing breathing and health ailments like COPD and bronchitis, and outdoor workers and athletes.

The science and data are overwhelming and clear:

Communities are counting on the Environmental Protection Agency to protect them from dirty air. EPA must implement and enforce strong safeguards against smog pollution, and Congress must reject any efforts to weaken the Clean Air Act's fundamental, successful public health protections.

"[The Clean Air Act] states that all Americans in all parts of the nation should have clean air to breathe, air that will have no adverse effects on their health."

- Senator Edmund Muskie,
September 21, 1970