

A!ert

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



Air Quality Regulations

US EPA Announces Updates to the Air Quality Index to Accompany Revised Standard for Fine Particulate Matter

On December 14, 2012, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that the agency was finalizing a new and stricter annual standard for fine particle pollution, also known as PM_{2.5}. This announcement will lower the PM_{2.5} Annual standard to 12 micrograms per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) of air, from the previous standard of 15 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. This new standard will not impact the daily PM_{2.5} standard set in 2008.

As part of this action to strengthen the PM_{2.5} standard, the EPA is revising the Air Quality Index (AQI) to reflect the potential health impacts of lower concentrations of fine particle pollution on public health. The AQI is a color coded graphic designed to convey levels of air quality to the public. The AQI uses the familiar green (good air quality), yellow (moderate), orange (unhealthy for sensitive populations) and red (unhealthy for everyone) color scheme to alert the public when air quality is forecast to be poor or unhealthy. The revision will set the Code Orange level, the level at which Air Quality Action Day alerts are issued, to correspond with the PM_{2.5} Daily standard of 35.5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Currently the Code Orange level for PM_{2.5} is 40 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ of particles. Under the AQI revision, the Code Red level will also be revised from 65 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ to 55.5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. These changes to the AQI will become effective on March 18, 2013.

With the revisions to the PM_{2.5} air quality standard and the AQI, the Delaware Valley is expected to experience approximately five Code Orange Air Quality Action Days for PM_{2.5}, annually, based on historic data. Most of these days are likely to correspond with Code Orange Ozone Air Quality Action Days during the summer months. While the number of Code Orange Air Quality Action Days for PM_{2.5} will increase slightly, it is important to note that air quality in the region is improving.

This revision of the AQI for PM_{2.5} is expected to raise public awareness of the health effects of particle pollution which has been linked to premature mortality, increased emergency room visits, and development of chronic respiratory disease. The Air Quality Partnership encourages the public to protect their health by avoiding strenuous activities on Action Days. The Partnership also encourages the public to reduce activities, such as letting vehicles idle and topping off the gas tank, that contribute to particle pollution. Air quality alerts are an important tool in these efforts.

For more information on EPA's announced 2012 Annual PM_{2.5} NAAQS revision, please visit: www.epa.gov/pm



Save the Date

**Monday,
February 11, 2013
Philadelphia Diesel
Difference Working Group
10:00 am**

*Location of Meeting:
DVRPC Conference Center
8th Floor
6th and Race Streets
Philadelphia, PA*

**Tuesday,
February 19, 2013 Air Quality
Partnership Board**

10:00 am
*Location of Meeting:
DVRPC Conference Center
8th Floor
6th and Race Streets
Philadelphia, PA*



Information

National Weather Service Proposes Cutting National Air Quality Forecast Program

The National Weather Service (NWS) has announced a proposal to cut the “National Air Quality Forecast Capability” program from its budget, beginning in March 2013. According to NWS acting director Laura Furgione, the cuts are necessary due to the current fiscal environment. The Obama Administration has proposed a budget of \$865,000 for the program for 2013. The U.S. House of Representative has proposed to fund the program at \$4 million. Both of these proposed budgets are below the \$5.4 million needed to run the national program.

The NWS air quality forecasting program issues alerts when air quality is forecast to be poor or unhealthy for the public. The news media and many public health agencies rely on these alerts as a source of reliable information to make the public aware of poor air quality days, in advance of the air quality episode, while the public has time to prepare and adjust their actions to protect their health. The loss of the program would also require the media to obtain the forecast from other sources, which, at least in the short term, would be a blow to the effectiveness of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Air Quality Index awareness program.

The NWS program also provides air quality modeling support for state and regional agencies that perform air forecasting services, such as the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Departments of Environmental Protection and Penn State University. The NWS has invested funding over the past decade to develop and maintain an air quality forecasting model that makes local forecasts more accurate and affordable for regional and state agencies. While these agencies would continue to perform air quality forecasting should the NWS program be cut, losing that support would increase the costs of air quality forecasting and might negatively impact the forecasting accuracy.

Critics of the proposed cuts to this program cite the magnitude of the public health benefits of the air quality alerts versus the relatively small savings in the national budget from cutting the program. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimate that nationally, poor air quality contributes to the pre-mature deaths of 50,000 people and adds approximately \$150 billion in health care costs. These numbers can be reduced by alerting susceptible populations to poor air quality days so those people can reduce their exposure to air pollution and avoid strenuous activities on unhealthy air quality days.

Critics also cite the economic benefits of the forecasts. Many state and local governments prohibit emitting activities, such as testing diesel generators, when poor air quality days are forecast. These regulations are an important and cost effective tool for helping regions comply with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards. An accurate and accessible air quality forecasting program allows businesses to plan for these events and comply with the regulations.

The NWS held a public comment period for the proposed cuts to the air quality forecasting system and received 98 negative comments from the EPA, state and local agencies, and the public health community. Only two comments supported the proposal and one of those was from a company that sells air quality forecasts.

The NWS expects to finalize its decision on March 27, 2013.



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