Newsday

LONG ISLAND

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Have you noticed the region's air quality getting worse? Talk about it online at **newsday.com**

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A majority of the ozone-causing emissions in Nassau, Suffolk and Queens came from on-road vehicles in 2002.

SMOG ALERT

As problem in NY region persists, officials weigh proposal to tighten ozone rules, reduce emissions

BY JENNIFER SMITH
jennifer.smith@newsday.com

As Long Island enters the steamy days of late summer, the sun's rays cook up a noxious brew from nitrous oxide and other chemicals in vehicle exhaust, smokestack emissions and even oil-based paint.

The result of this seasonal chemical reaction: ozone, the main component of smog. Unlike atmospheric ozone, which shields us from the sun's radiation, ground-level ozone dirties the air and triggers state alerts telling people with asthma and other respiratory ailments to stay inside. Inhaling it can be deadly. Recent studies link ozone exposure with increased mortality — even at concentrations below current federal air-quality standards.

This summer finds federal environmental regulators weighing a proposal to tighten regulations on ozone while state officials work to lower New York's emissions, which violate the existing federal standards. The state department of environmental conservation is releasing its 620-page proposal on Wednesday, while the federal Environmental Protection Agency has scheduled a hearing for later this week on its proposed tougher standard on smog. Ozone is casting an increasingly large shadow over public health despite some earlier success in bringing it down since the 1980s.

Failing grade for region

The problem is persistent and entrenched on Long Island and, indeed, the entire metropolitan area. During the May-through-September ozone season, local air routinely exceeds the federal ozone standard of .08 parts per million over an eight-hour period. A 2004 EPA evaluation found that Queens had an average ozone concentration of .085 parts per million and Suffolk had .10 parts per million (Nassau has no ozone monitor; officials use readings from monitors in eastern Queens, western Suffolk and eastern Suffolk to calculate overall regional air quality).

That has earned the region failing grades for the past seven years from the American Lung Association, whose analyses show the region failed to meet federal standards on average from 15 to 24 days per season. "Our 2007 state of the air report showed that Suffolk County has the worst ozone levels in all of the state," said Michael Seilback, director of public policy for the American Lung Association of New York State.

Officials with the New York state Department of Environmental Conservation say their new ozone plan will take the state within spitting distance of the federal standard by 2012. The as yet unreleased document covers everything from tweaking emissions trading programs for regional power plants to new limits on volatile organic compounds contained in asphalt, bathroom cleaners and even urinal cakes.

But even as state air quality officials struggle to meet the current goal, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has proposed to tighten those standards to between .07 to .075 parts per million. A public hearing this week in Philadelphia on the proposed revision is likely to draw comment from industry groups who oppose the change, as well as from environmental and health advocates, who say a far stricter standard is needed in light of recent research on ozone's harmful effects.

Last fall, the EPA's clean air scientific advisory committee recommended tightening the current standard of .08 parts per million to a range of between .06 to .07 parts per million, a recommendation that advocates such as the Natural Resources Defense Council's clean air director John Walke said the agency ignored because of pressure from the Bush administration and industry. EPA spokeswoman Jessica Emond defended the proposed revision, saying it was protective of public health and "based on sound science."

Walke called the current standard "indefensibly unprotective" and said that the failure of Long Island and the New York metropolitan area to attain even that standard was "sobering."

"Unhealthy air"

As of Aug. 6, ozone concentrations in the New York metropolitan area exceeded those standards on 11 days this year, according to the DEC.

"The bottom line is we do have unhealthy air," said Jason Babbie, an environmental policy analyst for the New York Public Interest Research Group. "It's absurd that there are days when the state or federal government

Plan hopes to get state ozone levels near federal standards by 2012

is telling you, 'Don't breathe, it's bad for your health.' "

Federal and state environmental officials sounded a more optimistic note on the region's ozone problem. They pointed to developments in the late 1980s that they said had lowered New York's ozone concentrations, such as vehicle inspections and tighter emissions standards for cars, as well as stricter rules on pollution from power plant and factory smokestacks.

Still, EPA projections show the New York City metropolitan area "could be out of attainment even in the year 2020," said Bob Kelly, an EPA regional air meteorologist.

So what makes ozone such a difficult problem to tackle? Part of the problem, experts and advocates said, is that the biggest source of ozone-forming pollutants is also the most dispersed: the millions of cars, SUVs and trucks that jam local roads and expressways.

In 2002, nearly 60 percent of the ozone-causing emissions in Nassau, Suffolk and Queens came from on-road vehicles, according to DEC emissions data for that year, the most recent available. Cars, SUVs and pickups accounted for 90.4 percent of the pollution from onroad vehicles in Nassau, 91.6 percent in Suffolk and 91.4 percent in Queens.

"There's been an improvement on the enforcement end of things with emissions," said Robert Sliwinski, director of the DEC's bureau of air quality planning. "But the miles of traffic traveled have increased."

By contrast, power plants and stationary sources of pollution such as factories comprised only about 2.5 percent of the total emissions for all three counties that year.

TALK ABOUT IT

Will the government be able to improve air quality? Talk about it at:

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Emissions reductions

Most changes in the new state ozone attainment plan concern those sources, although it does factor in recent more stringent federal regulations for diesel engines and fuel. Other areas include reducing emissions from industrial, commercial and institutional boilers, such as those serving hospitals or large residential buildings.

"It's much easier to go after the big polluters," Babbie said.

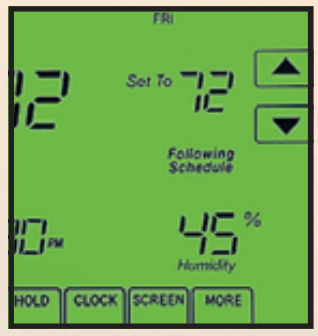
According to DEC computer modeling, under the new plan New York state's ozone level would be about at .086 parts per million by 2012. That's shy of the federal standard, but not by much. In practice, the EPA rounds its numbers down, so ozone concentrations of up to .084 parts per million still fall within the attainment zone.

The state plan does not take into account the proposed revisions that the EPA announced this June. "The standard we're trying to attain was first adopted in 1997," Sliwinski said. "This is the one we have to hit now."

Depending on how the federal process goes, the current standard on which the New York emissions reduction plan is based could well remain in place.

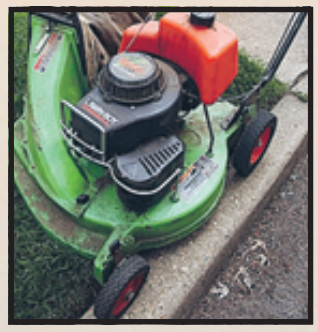
The EPA wants public comment on keeping its current ozone standards. A decision on the final standard will be issued next March, the agency said.

Reducing air pollution

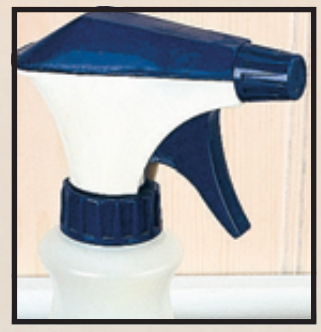


SAVE IT. Conserve energy at home and the office. Set your thermostat a little higher in the summer and participate in utilities' load-sharing and energy conservation programs.

DECREASE IT. Reduce driving. Carpool, use public transportation, walk, or bicycle to reduce ozone pollution, especially on hot summer days.



MAINTAIN IT. Keep cars, trucks, gas-powered lawn and garden equipment, boats and other engines properly tuned and maintained. In the summer, fill gas tanks during the cooler evening hours, be careful not to spill.



BE WISE. Use household and garden chemicals wisely. Use water-based paints; store and handle solvents and gasoline carefully. Obey label directions for proper use and disposal.

While we're at it . . .

Some suggestions to help reduce greenhouse gases that threaten atmospheric ozone, which shields us from the sun's radiation.

LIGHTING

If every U.S. household replaced conventional bulbs in the five most frequently used light fixtures with bulbs that have earned the government's Energy Star, it would prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions from nearly 10 million cars.

DRIVING

Leaving your car at home just two days a week will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 1,600 pounds per year.

GARBAGE

Reducing garbage by 10 percent — by purchasing products with less packaging — could save natural resources and up to 2,400 pounds of carbon dioxide each year.

HYBRIDS

If hybrid vehicles with a fuel economy of 55 mpg were added to the U.S. fleet by 2020, each vehicle would save nearly 5,000 gallons of gasoline and eliminate 60 tons of global warming emissions.

The smog situation

The particles that create smog come from two principal sources — vehicles and power plants. Here is the portion of ozone-causing emissions in 2002 generated by both sources:

ON-ROAD VEHICLES*	NON-ROAD VEHICLES*	POWER PLANTS, FACTORIES, ETC.
61%	28%	2.5%

* Figures are for vehicles registered in each county

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