

# Regional Clean Air Challenges



## Introduction

The Clean Air Act requires the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set National Ambient Air Quality Standards for pollutants that are harmful to human health and the environment. EPA has established standards for six air pollutants that are commonly found in outdoor air throughout the United States. They are particulate matter, ground-level ozone, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and lead.

## Regional Status

The Puget Sound region has the most serious air quality issues in Washington State and is the only region in the state with a federally designated non-attainment area (a geographic area that fails to meet national air quality standards). Portions of Pierce County were recently classified as a non-attainment area under federal air quality standards for fine particulates. In the summer of 2008 the central Puget Sound region violated the federal ozone standards for the first time in over a decade and is likely to have portions of multiple counties designated as a federal ozone non-attainment area in early 2010. Furthermore, potential cancer risk from air toxics in the Central Puget Sound region is in the top five percent in the nation, with diesel exhaust and wood smoke creating substantial public health risks.

## Impact of Non-attainment

The region faces the most significant air quality issues in the state because of its population density and anticipated growth. Non-attainment of federal standards means that the health of citizens in our largest urban areas is compromised. Non-attainment areas also are subject to a more-stringent permitting program for industrial facilities to ensure that new and modified sources of pollution do not impede progress toward cleaner air. In addition, the region could be subject to federal sanctions for failure to develop and implement a plan to achieve the standards. These sanctions include limitations on industrial facility expansion, loss of federal transportation funds and the imposition of a federal plan to meet the standards, which may cause greater disruption to industry and cost the state more than if we deal with the problem now as a state.

The State of Washington has enjoyed a competitive advantage over areas of the country with dirty air and we will lose that advantage if we don't invest in improving air quality. Further, as studies continue to show health effects from low levels of air pollutants, these federal standards are expected to be tightened in the coming years, which could leave more of our region's residents breathing air deemed unhealthy.

## Actions

Funding is needed for incentives to reduce wood smoke, such as wood stove replacements, and grant programs to reduce diesel emissions. These programs are critical to achieving healthy air quality and avoiding the negative consequences of non-compliance with federal clean air standards and regulatory requirements. Additional funding will be needed in coming years for the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency and the Department of Ecology Air Program to develop federally required State Implementation Plans demonstrating how the region will come back into attainment of federal air quality standards.

There are also significant opportunities to help meet the state's climate change targets by making strategic investments in the state's air quality programs.

## For more information

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