

AIR QUALITY

Smog, kids, cars . . . and the air we breathe

Summer brings great things to Cincinnati. Even in the cold of February winter, thoughts of summer carry images of trips to Coney Island, nighttime street festivals and watching the Reds work their way to yet another championship. But summer also means something else to our city . . . smog.

Smog (also called ground-level ozone) is created when pollution from gasoline burning engines mixes in the air. Add sunlight to bake this pollution soup and a layer of hazy, cloudy smog begins to take shape. More than just a haze, smog is a health threat to people throughout the Greater Cincinnati area.

According to the American Lung Association, smog presents short- and long-term problems for many people. Children, the elderly and people with bronchial disorders such as asthma are particularly at risk - although when ozone (smog) levels are high, even well-trained athletes have problems. Throat irritation, coughing, and choking are some of the immediate effects ozone can produce as it slips unseen into the lungs. The effect over time is not as clear. Smog is a relatively new issue in the medical world and one that will take time to document. Laboratory studies show serious effects such as scarring of lung tissues, reduced lung elasticity and permanent respiratory damage. These studies indicate that ozone is more than just an irritation and were the reason for serious action taken six years ago.

Ozone is one of six types of air pollution regulated by the U.S. EPA. Acceptable levels of ozone were defined based on health studies. Greater Cincinnati was designated a "Moderate Nonattainment" area because its ozone readings were higher than the health-based standard. The seven-county area including Southwest Ohio and Northern Kentucky faced the difficult task of cleaning the air.

Since 1990, Greater Cincinnati has taken several steps to meet the healthy air standard. Industry, once the largest contributor to the ozone problem, now only produces

20 percent of the ozone-forming pollution. Pollution control systems at gasoline pumps collect the dangerous fumes that escape the gas tank when thousands of drivers fill up. The new E-check auto emissions test will remove about 10 percent of the smog-forming pollution from the air.



The
Regional Ozone Coalition is
developing materials for use by
teachers and parents. For
information, call Jeff Blunt at
Hamilton County Environmental
Services at 333-4741.

These programs have improved the area's air dramatically, but in order to meet the healthy air standard, action needs to be taken to change the activities that cause smog - especially on hot, dry days that are perfect for smog formation. Additionally, more needs to be done to solve the long-term problem as more and more cars crowd our streets . . . education.

The Regional Ozone Coalition was formed two years ago to tell the public exactly what can be done to improve air quality. The group organized environmental and meteorological experts to forecast smog. Based on these forecasts, the coalition calls Smog Alerts to warn the public when smog levels could get high.

The coalition asked every member of the area to "Do Your Share For Cleaner Air." This meant taking action on Smog Alert days:

- Ride the bus instead of driving
- Carpool instead of driving alone
- Mow the lawn after 6 p.m.
- Refuel cars after 6 p.m.
- Ride a bike or walk instead of driving on short trips
- Save electricity
- Don't use oil-based paints and stains

Public surveys showed that people were also changing their daily habits on days that are designated as Smog Alerts. By helping the public understand that simple changes in daily habits (much like recycling paper instead of throwing it out) make a big difference, the coalition hopes to reduce the need for mandatory air improvement programs.