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Residents face changes to cut ozone
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EPA says three counties don't meet standards, gives them three years to reduce pollution

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The Legislature, county councils and Upstate residents must change habits to reduce ozone or face possible federal penalties that may cost the region jobs and money for new roads.

The Environmental Protection Agency accepted a 23-point clean air plan submitted by Greenville, Anderson and Spartanburg counties but said Thursday the three counties don't meet new standards.

That gives the region three years to cut ozone. If it doesn't, tough business regulations will come in 2007, along with a loss of federal highway money.

Now it's up to the three county councils, other local governments and the state Legislature to begin carrying out the plan.

A committee that created the Upstate's plan will meet soon to find out which proposals offer the best "bang for our buck," said Phillip Shoopman, its chairman.

Many of the recommendations are voluntary, and only a few need approval. Those include expanding bus routes, tax credits and banning outdoor burning.

But the Upstate can't wait to start doing the little things, like combining shopping trips and refueling cars after rush hour, Shoopman said. If residents start now, the region could be in compliance with the EPA by next year or the year after.

"Carpooling is not just a tree-hugger idea," Shoopman said. "It's a practical idea that could literally mean bringing more jobs here."

Greenville joined 473 counties in 31 states in not meeting the new ozone standards. More than 150 million people -- half the country's population -- live in areas in violation. The number of counties in violation nearly doubled from the old standard.

While the majority of the Upstate's pollutants are home-grown, sources beyond the Upstate's control contribute to the problem -- the 90,000 vehicles passing through on

Interstate 85 daily and coal-fired power plants as far away as the Midwest.

Pickens and Cherokee counties met the new EPA clean air regulations. They're free and clear, for now, said Stan Meiburg, deputy regional administrator for the EPA in Atlanta.

However, the EPA designated Greenville, Anderson and Spartanburg as one area, so even if Greenville meets the standards, the county would remain in nonattainment until the other two counties follow suit.

"Achieving the standard will be a challenge and will require good cooperation from the counties and everyone in the area," Meiburg said.

Local Sierra Club chairman Eric Thompson said the Upstate has two choices to get levels down: improve gas mileage in vehicles or drive fewer miles.

But there are huge opportunities where residents can use this to their advantage, he said. Creating and promoting clean technologies is a growing business, and one the region could attract.

"Hybrid cars are just the start," he said. "There's an entire new industry that has to do with energy efficiency."

Shoopman said groups that are often on the opposite sides of issues worked together to write the plan, so it's likely they will team up to carry it out.

"If you can get county councils, business leaders, the American Lung Association and Upstate Forever in a room, and you can find at least something they agree on, you have something," Shoopman said.

Soon, residents might start hearing public service announcements on television and radio about how to reduce ozone.

Ground-level ozone can cause serious health problems, effectively sunburning the lungs, doctors say. It is especially harmful to children, the elderly and people with existing respiratory problems.

The new regulations were put in place in 1997 but were delayed four years by a court challenge. The Supreme Court upheld the standards in 2001.

The EPA reported 2,688 counties met the standards, including all the counties in 19 states: Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming.

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