

Ozone levels leave room for improvement

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Federal ground level ozone standards have become a moving target, one that business advocates fear as a brake on industrial expansion and environmental activists applaud as a boon to public health.

New standards contemplated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would lower the ozone limit from .085 to .075. It is a minuscule change, but one that holds big potential effects on industrial recruitment and on public health.

"Depending on which (EPA) program you're talking about there is a 5-1 up to 20-1 cost benefit ratio for cleaning up the air," said David Sarren, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center.

That would be either \$5 or \$20 worth of health benefit for every \$1 spent on air quality.

"Considering the cost of health care, I'd imagine a lot of companies would cheer improved air quality," Sarren said.

"A stronger standard is clearly needed in order to achieve the Clean Air Act's overriding goal of protecting public health," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever. "We reject the claims by some that the Upstate will not be able to comply with a tougher standard."

Ruth Albright of Synterra, a Greenville environmental engineering firm, works with the Greenville Chamber of Commerce on air quality issues.

"I'm not sure the change is worth the cost to industry," she said. "There is no doubt that when ground level ozone levels are high there is an effect on health, particularly with persons who have breathing difficulties. I'm a non-smoker and healthy, but even I feel it when the ozone creeps into the high levels. There's a burning in the throat and nostrils that is very unpleasant."

"But I don't see that lowering the standard will have a major effect (on health). Really, we're talking about background levels when we look at .075."

The Upstate region is in compliance, but barely, on the ozone standard. Those standards are based on a variety of items, but basically revolve around emissions of Oxides of Nitrogen from smokestacks and vehicle tailpipes and the presence of volatile organic compounds that can be manmade or produced naturally, according to the EPA.

EPA can force out of compliance regions to cut back on road building with the ultimate penalty, withholding federal highway dollars, and by fining smokestack industries.

Breathing ozone can trigger a variety of health problems including chest pain, coughing, throat irritation, and congestion. It can worsen bronchitis, emphysema, and asthma. Ground-level ozone also can reduce

lung function and inflame the linings of the lungs. Repeated exposure may permanently scar lung tissue, EPA said.

Humans can reportedly detect ozone in concentrations as low as .001 parts per million. It has a distinctive chemical smell and is most often associated with lightning strikes in most people's minds.

Ben Haskew, president of the Greenville Chamber, said he's worried by the potential effect of being declared out of compliance would have on industrial recruitment, but he also is a strong advocate of clean air.

"We have a strong environmental commitment at the Chamber," he said, "and understand the value of having good air quality on our industrial recruitment efforts and on the public health."

Other areas in the Southeast have had ozone problems, said Sarren, and have weathered them economically.

"Atlanta was declared out of compliance in the early 1990s and by the late

'90s lost federal highway funding," he said. "But despite all that and the ups and downs of the economy as a whole, Atlanta seems to be doing quite nicely."

Charlotte is out of compliance, said Natalie English, governmental affairs coordinator for the Charlotte Chamber.

"We've not seen any real effect on our industrial recruitment yet," she said. "But it does make it harder to attract industries to an area and if sanctions are invoked (loss of highway funding) we could have real problems."

Loss of highway funding can make improving emissions from the transportation sector more difficult to deal with through public transportation, Sarren said.

Until that issue is addressed no real

progress is expected, he said, but areas have to use their highway funds wisely.

"You can't build your way out of air quality problems. More highways aren't the answer."

In the Upstate, Albright and Sarren agree, there is about a 50/50 mix of transportation and smokestack factors that contribute to the ozone level.

Sarren said so long as areas continue to build big interstate-style highway systems that encourage lots of travel and fail to encourage use of public transportation little progress is likely.

"Sprawl is the enemy of improved air quality," he said. "And that's true on a variety of levels. The six states served by Southern Environmental Law Center would be the eighth largest producer of greenhouse gases as a nation, if they were a nation. That's due to sprawl and our love affair with the automobile."

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