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USA

Haze hangs over US summer

Already, 25 states have violated US clean-air standards at least once. The electrical power crunch adds more fumes.

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In Houston earlier this month, even though cars vanished from the roads after tropical storm Allison, the city exceeded federal air-quality standards for ozone.

In the nation's capital, hot and hazy weather last week mixed with the noxious odor of gasoline and diesel fumes - to the point where the EPA had to post air-quality warnings from Washington to New Jersey.

Even before summer officially arrives, smog is hanging over many cities like a pot lid, portending a potentially bad summer for air quality in the United States.

While any smog season depends heavily on the vagaries of the weather, the need to ramp up power generation in some states, coupled with unusual problems in other areas, is leading to concerns that a decade of clean-air improvements could be stalled.

Already, the country is off to a disturbing start: 25 states - an unusually high number - have had at least one day when their air quality did not meet federal standards. And, if the weather turns hot, the number of "orange" and "red" alerts - when people with health problems are cautioned to stay inside - could rise substantially. "I am concerned we are going to have a very bad summer of smog," says Frank O'Donnell of the Clean Air Trust, an environmental group in Washington.

Although air-quality improvements have come thanks to cleaner automobiles, the nation's smog problem may get worse in some areas in particular this summer because of the demand for more kilowatts.

As the temperature rises, Americans crank up their air conditioners. With electric supplies tight, utilities are turning to older, dirtier power plants that burn fuel oil or coal. Just last week, California Gov. Gray Davis (D) relaxed the rules on pollution from the state's natural-gas plants.

And some parts of the country, such as Houston, the nation's smoggiest city, are struggling with air-quality problems because of their lack of public transportation. Houston also has a heavy concentration of refining and petrochemical companies.

In a recent report, the American Lung Association found that high levels of ozone continue to be a national problem. Using data from the Environmental Protection Agency, it estimated that an additional 9 million people breathed dirty air in the past three years. "The overwhelming message is that air pollution is far from solved," says Paul Billings, spokesman for the ALA.



HOUSTON HAZE: The city has the dubious distinction of being America's most air-polluted. It is already battling summer smog.
CARLOS ANTONIO RIOS/AP/FILE

Ingredients of smog soup

Ozone, or smog, is produced with the right mix of sunlight, stagnant air, and hot temperatures. Medical officials blame smog for respiratory ills. A recent report linked the fine particles found in smog to heart attacks.

Business groups, however, say there has been considerable progress since the hazy days of the 1980s. In a report issued earlier this year, the Foundation for Clean Air Progress, an industry-sponsored group, said an analysis of high levels of ozone pollution shows that it declined 43 percent in every city with an ozone problem.

"We have made tremendous progress," says Bill Buff, a group spokesman. For example, he points out that in 1980 Los Angeles exceeded the federal limit on ozone 156 times. But, by 1999, it exceeded federal standards only six times.

Mr. O'Donnell agrees there has been progress, but he says the business group's figures are overstated because they are based on pre-1997 health standards, which the EPA says no longer represent the levels where ozone causes health problems.



FORECAST SMOG: A sign warns Atlanta motorists of pollution. At least 25 states are already struggling with summer smog. JOHN BAZEMORE/AP/FILE

Both groups agree there is still plenty of work left to do. If this is a hot summer - and it has started that way - ozone levels will be pushed to unhealthy levels.

A chief battleground in the fight against dirty air will be California. Even though Governor Davis has eased the strictures on gas-fired plants, he remains under pressure from business interests to allow diesel generators to run any time this summer so firms can avoid shutting down during blackouts.

"While small and scattered, the proliferation [of diesel generators] could significantly add to air pollution in California this summer," says Matt Petersen, executive director

Still, the smog created by the diesels could be offset somewhat by the retrofitting of utilities with pollution-control technology, which has already cleaned up some of California's big "boiler" power plants.

The improvements have made them 90 percent cleaner, says Mike Schieble, deputy executive officer of the California Air Resources Board.

"We actually think that on really hot days, when everything is up and running, we'll see a little less pollution this summer compared to last summer," he says.

Until recently, some of the power plants in the state were limited in the number of hours they could operate. The goal is to help keep particulate levels down.

Davis, however, recently signed an executive order that allows the state's power plants to run when needed. The state will charge operators a pollution fee, which they will fold into the prices they charge. "If we said, 'No, you've reached your limits and can't operate any more,' we would face more blackouts. And that's not a proposition anyone wants to face," says Mr. Schieble.

California environmental groups want the surplus fees paid by the utilities to be used specifically for pollution reduction.

"There is no solid plan as to how that is going to happen yet," says Sheryl Carter, senior policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

While L.A.'s air problems are bad, Houston is becoming the latest poster child for pollution. For the second year in a row, Houston overtook Los Angeles in the number of days it exceeded federal ozone standards - 44 compared with 40 in Los Angeles. "The air is a very busy place during the summer. Something like 50 to 100 different chemical reactions are going on simultaneously, the most famous of those products is ozone," says Gene McMullen, an official with Houston's Bureau of Air Quality Control.

That has caused a lot of panic and handwringing, especially after a second year showed Houston's new ranking at the top of the smog chart was no aberration. Consequently, Texas officials rushed to finish an air-quality implementation plan.

That proposal, soon to be submitted to the EPA, is essential to keeping federal highway dollars flowing to the state. "The hope is we'll be in compliance with ozone by 2007," says Rob Barrett, assistant director of Harris County Pollution Control, which includes Houston.

Some southern states are also scrambling to meet higher standards. Long blamed for pollution problems as far away as Boston, the South's coal-fired power plants are only ratcheting up operations.

A broad population shift toward the Mason-Dixon line has caused the generators to run at full capacity, even as car exhausts increasingly envelop work commutes around cities like Richmond, Va., and Athens, Ga.

The latest Lung Association report shows five new Southern communities joining America's top 25 ozone-polluted cities. These include Richmond-Petersburg, Va., Baton Rouge, La., Louisville, Ky., Greensboro-Winston-Salem-High Point, N.C., and Chattanooga, Tenn.

Progress in Dixie

In an indication that these warning signs are beginning to register, three Dixie governors - from North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee - recently signed a clean-air pact. Although non-binding, the accord says "each state must do its part to protect and improve air quality."

The regional approach is essential since air pollution doesn't know state borders. In fact, many southern states complain that a lot of their air pollution is generated by coal-fired Tennessee Valley Authority plants. TVA is now spending \$1 billion to reduce its own emissions.

The governors' recent summit coincides with proposed legislation in North Carolina, which would earmark \$2.2 billion to clean-up five Tarheel smokestacks that emit the heaviest load of sulfur, nitrogen oxide, and mercury. In addition, the bill, which aims to cut pollution by 70 percent year-round, would also eliminate an EPA rule that allows energy firms to buy "pollution credits" from other companies that have already cleaned-up.

"The North Carolina smokestacks legislation is looking at taking real and substantive steps to reduce pollution," says Brownie Newman of the Western North Carolina Alliance in Asheville, N.C. "We may be the first Southern state to clean up our power plants, but we won't be the last."

• Contributing to this report were Kris Axtman in Houston, Jeff Tyler in Los Angeles, and Patrik Jonsson in North Carolina.

■ For further information:

- [Smog City](#)
- [How Ozone Pollution Works](#) How Stuff Works
- [EPA Office of Air and Radiation](#)
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