

Arizona ozone levels rise as feds tighten air quality restrictions

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Across much of Arizona there was more ozone in the air this summer than there was last year, including several days in Phoenix where the levels spiked into the unhealthy range.

This comes amid a national struggle about lower ozone standards, which Arizona has taken a firm stand against.

Ozone is a gas that occurs both near the ground and high up in the earth's stratosphere. The high ozone protects the planet from the sun's harmful UV rays, but the lower ozone is a dangerous air pollutant.

Over the past 20 years, ozone levels in most of Arizona have steadily declined, which has been credited largely to improved vehicle emissions. But, there are years that buck the trend and the summer of 2017 had significantly more days with high levels of ozone than 2016.

There are several possible explanations for this increase in ozone production. James

Anderson, senior sustainability scientist at Arizona State University, says that for Phoenix and northern Arizona cities, smoke from the Goodwin fire in the Bradshaw Mountains in Yavapai County could have contributed to some of the extra-high ozone levels.

Timothy Franquist, air quality director of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, explains the increase in a different way. He said that plant growth can be a big contributor to ozone, especially in Maricopa County.

Plants emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which interact with oxides of nitrogen (NOX) to create ozone. Franquist speculates that a particularly wet winter led to increased plant growth, which therefore led to a spike in VOCs across the state. Combine that with a long, hot summer and it could lead to increased ozone production.

Population increase also leads to ozone production through the use of vehicles, which emit NOX, one of the key components of ozone.

"When you look at the overall issue, it's

vehicle emissions that contribute most in the Phoenix area," said Franquist. "Right now we have a love affair with our cars."

He doesn't believe people in Phoenix will give up their desire for an individual ride to work. But, he sees another way to reduce ozone-- switching to an electric car fleet, which will require significant infrastructure improvements.

Besides NOX and VOCs, production of ozone also needs the right conditions of hot, clear weather with little to no wind. This summer was hotter than in 2016, with no shortage of still, clear days.

The increase in Arizona's ozone production occurs just as a new EPA rule that decreases the amount of ozone allowed in the air begins to come into effect. The new standard, revised in a 2015 EPA rule review, lowers the allowable ozone level from 75 parts per billion to 70 ppb.

The rule change faced criticism from Arizona and other Western states that claimed it would be impossible for them to comply with the lower standards. National legislation has been introduced into both the House and Senate that would delay the lower standards by 10 years. A House resolution passed in July, but a comparable Senate resolution has yet to see any movement.

The EPA is beginning to act on the new standards, which were supposed to go into effect last month. On November 6, a list of counties that were in compliance with the

70 ppb rule was released by the EPA. The list included Arizona counties, Apache, Cochise, Greenlee and Santa Cruz.


However, most of Arizona is not on the list. The EPA wrote in a fact sheet released online that the agency was not yet prepared to issue designations for these areas.

Franquist says for the Phoenix metro area, it will take about ten years to meet the lower standard if the current long-term downward trend for ozone continues.

However, Anderson says even a limit of 70 ppb is above a healthy level of ozone. The ozone limit in the European Union is only 60 ppb, closer to what he feels is safe.

When people breathe high levels of ozone, it causes inflammation in the lungs. It's similar to your lungs getting a sunburn, said Janice Nolen, American Lung Association assistant vice president of national policy and advocacy. Over time it can decrease lung capacity, even in healthy adults.

"One thing that we do know, we just learned over the last 10 to 15 years, is it can actually shorten life," said Nolen, referring to breathing ozone.

Most at risk are those with respiratory illnesses like asthma, along with people who do manual activity outdoors in the summer such as construction workers or landscapers. The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality sends out alerts on high ozone days advising that residents avoid strenuous activity outside and reduce car use if possible. 

Ducey orders removal of question about criminal histories from state job applications

BY RACHEL LEINGANG
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The Ducey administration called on state agencies to get rid of a check box on job applications that asks about prospective employees' criminal histories.

Gov. Doug Ducey issued an executive order November 6 directing the Arizona Department of Administration to change its hiring procedures to handle criminal histories differently.

Dubbed the "second chance box" by the Ducey administration, the changes will eliminate questions about criminal histories on state job applications, and criminal histories will not disqualify someone from receiving an interview.

The Ducey administration was mulling such a policy earlier this year.

The order points out that 1.5 million Arizona adults have arrests or convictions on their records, and employment is one of the greatest factors in their potential success upon reentering society.

The effort joins several other initiatives spearheaded by Ducey to reduce recidivism and provide released prisoners with second chances. Other efforts include employment centers at prisons, medication designed to inhibit opioid usage and food stamps for drug felons.

The "ban the box" movement, also referred to as fair chance hiring, started more than a decade ago by advocating for eliminating questions about criminal records until later in the hiring process as a way to help ex-offenders get jobs.

More than half of states have some form of policy that delays the process of asking about criminal records. Some states remove the box from governmental job applications, while others also require private employers to remove it.

But Arizona's new "second chance box" directive does not apply to the private sector, only to state government jobs.

And Ducey's executive order recognizes there may be particular crimes that could preclude someone from advancing in the hiring process. There are also federal and state laws that could prevent someone convicted of crimes to get certain

jobs, the order said.

"This is to allow people that have paid their debt to society, who have served their time, to have some hope of a job or a career or an opportunity," Ducey said.

In another move to reduce recidivism, Ducey announced a deal with Uber, the ride-sharing company. Uber will put up \$5,000 to help people get to their job sites if public transit is not available, whether because of geography or simply the time of day. That is contingent on a dollar-for-dollar match from the state the Governor's Office said will be provided out of existing funds within the Department of Corrections.

In addition, the state trotted out details for placing a new "re-entry center" for released inmates who have committed some violation of their release conditions and otherwise would wind up back in prison.


Under Arizona law, offenders are released after serving 85 percent of their sentence. But they remain under "community supervision" for the balance of their term.

Sometimes, a former inmate in that category fails a drug test or some other condition of release but has not committed any new crimes.

Before the re-entry center, the Department of Corrections could either ignore the violation or put the person back behind bars. Under the latter option, the person would lose a job and housing.

The centers, first proposed by Ducey in 2016, provide a place for the former inmate to spend a few weekends locked up while also getting drug counseling. But they are released during the week to keep their jobs.

An existing facility in north Phoenix -- one that provoked opposition from neighbors who were not notified first -- will be closed. Aides to the governor also said the central location is closer to employers.

And existing pre-release employment centers operated in several prisons will also be consolidated there. 

— Howard Fischer of Capitol Media Services contributed to this article.



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