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Breathe Project Responds to Pittsburgh Works Report on Region's Air Quality

Today a fossil-fuel backed industry front group released a report, "Clearing the Air," that minimizes our region's air quality challenges by offering up a mix of cherry-picked information that attempts to take the spotlight off the serious public health challenges that our region faces when it comes to air quality from polluting industries.

"There can be no victory laps on air quality achievement in Southwestern Pennsylvania," said Matt Mehalik, executive director of the Breathe Project. "We have serious challenges. Attempts to muddle this picture come at the expense of residents who experience negative air quality on a daily basis and who suffer the health consequences of ongoing air pollution. The report also minimizes data when it comes to cancer risk in our region."

Our county comes in last place when compared with other regions in the country in terms of EPA attainment of annual PM 2.5 standards. In the year 2010, according to Clean Air Task Force scientists, 90% of all U.S. monitors in the country had met the 2012 PM 2.5 standard of 12ug/m³. Allegheny County's monitoring data did not. By 2019, 99% of monitors in U.S. met the EPA standard and 94% of these monitors met the World Health Organization standard of 10ug/m³. Allegheny County's monitoring data did not. It now appears that Allegheny County may meet this standard in 2020 based on preliminary data.

"The facts show that we are laggards when it comes to complying with bare minimum standards," Mehalik added.

Meanwhile, air quality and public health scientists and researchers have strong evidence that the standard should be set to 8ug/m³ in order to be health protective.^{1,2} Allegheny County's

¹ 85 FR 24094, pp. 24117-24118.

² U.S. EPA. Policy Assessment for the Review of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for Particulate Matter, January 2020. EPA-452/R-20-002.

monitors do not come close to this standard, yet some industry groups in our community believe this is something to be celebrated.

The report released today completely ignores the health harms at pollution levels that public health researchers have documented that impact the health of our region's residents. Moreover, the review of science literature affirms PM 2.5 exposure levels and chronic health effects with no apparent lower bound³ and acute health effects with no apparent lower bound⁴. This means that it is critical to reduce the PM exposures as much as possible in order to reduce negative health effects.

The report was released one day after an international study was released by Harvard University and University College London.⁵ The study shows that even at lower concentrations, pollution caused by fossil fuels is deadlier than previously understood.

In Pennsylvania, there were over 25,380 extra deaths per year of people older than 14-years due to exposure to PM2.5 from fossil fuels. Pennsylvania has the greatest number of excess deaths due to exposure to PM 2.5 from fossil fuels per 100,000 people in the United States out of any other state.

In Pennsylvania, 19% is the attributable fraction of all deaths for the population above 14-years attributable to long term exposure to fossil-fuel related PM 2.5. These findings underline the importance of reducing air pollution further — a goal that should be set by regional and statewide public health agencies and air quality regulators.

This work is significant because it attributes air pollution driven deaths directly to fossil fuel combustion, information that the polluting industries behind today's report want to overshadow.

The report is a sign of ongoing economic and employment weaknesses of these industries, a situation highlighted yesterday in an impactful report by the Ohio River Valley Institute⁶. This report documents the decade-long failure of the natural gas boom in the Marcellus and Utica fields to deliver growth in jobs, income and population to counties in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia that produce more than 90% of the region's natural gas. It also calls into question

³ Cohen, Brauer, et al, "Estimates and 25-year trends of the global burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution: an analysis of data from the Global Burden of Diseases Study 2015," *Lancet* 2017; 389: 1907–18.

⁴ Schwartz et al, "The Concentration Response Relation between PM 2.5 and Daily Deaths," *Environ Health Perspect.* 2002 Oct; 110(10): 1025–1029.

⁵ Karn Vohra, Alina Vodonos, Joel Schwartz, Eloise A. Marais, Melissa P. Sulprizio, Loretta J. Mickley, Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated by fossil fuel combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem, *Environmental Research*, 2021, 110754, ISSN 0013-9351, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2021.110754>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935121000487>)

⁶ Ohio River Valley Institute, "Appalachia's Natural Gas Counties: Contributing more to the U.S. economy and getting less in return," Available Online, https://mcusercontent.com/1805eb5b6c93b220b9723dc3b/files/29fc4767-e6a6-409b-af2e-a6f06a2c6d2e/Frackalachia_Economic_Impact_Report.pdf

any strategies that foreground fossil fuel development as a future-facing, viable strategy for healthy and thriving communities.

Most important, absent from this report were community voices—people who live throughout our region, who experience bad smells and harmful emission levels regularly, who document emission events using [Breathe Project Breathe Cams](#), and who speak out at public hearings regularly calling upon regulators to take action to protect the health of community members.

The Breathe Project is a Southwestern Pennsylvania organization that avails itself of top-level health, epidemiological, and air quality science and public health information. We are a collaboration of over 47 organizations working to improve air quality, eliminate climate pollution and make our region a healthy and prosperous place to live. We are public health professionals, academics, environmental advocates, and citizens. We use the best available science and technology to better understand the quality of the air we breathe and provide opportunities for citizens to engage and take action.