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Breathe Project Statement on CODE RED EPA AQI Air Quality TODAY, Dec. 10-11, 2020

For the second time in 30 days, Allegheny County is in the midst of another weather-related inversion that has trapped pollution over the region, resulting in a Code Red level of poor air and PM 2.5 levels that registered 167 on the EPA Air Quality Index in Clairton and Braddock, Pa. between 4 a.m. and 10 a.m. today.

This level of pollution places an unfair burden on the residents of Allegheny County – especially during a pandemic that exacerbates respiratory illnesses. Pollution from the Clairton Coke Works and Edgar Thompson Steel Works operations affects a large number of people, particularly many number of low- income, elderly, and African American people. According to environmental justice statistics from the [U.S. EPA's EJ Screen tool](#):

- Approximately 130,000 people live within a 5-mile radius of the Clairton Coke Works property
- People in this area have air that is worse than 91 percent of the entire country for particulate matter
- 1/3 of the people living in this area have low income
- 36 percent of people in this area are minority population, primarily African American
- 1/5 of the people living in this area are older than 64-years-old

The impacts do extend beyond the Mon Valley. There have been a large number of smell complaints submitted today on the [Smell Pittsburgh](#) site.

We'd like to remind the media that this acute pollution episode falls in a year of ongoing chronic pollution from coke oven emissions. So far this year, the H2S standard has been exceeded 23 times at the Liberty air quality monitoring site according to preliminary ACHD data. Weather is not the cause of these bad air days. Weather only exacerbates what heavy industry dumps into the air.

These incidents are occurring despite an ongoing pandemic where it is [well-documented](#) that increased particle pollution results in increased negative impacts on disease prevalence and outcomes.

There is a [well-documented background of science](#) regarding the linear dose response of health impacts associated with increases in PM 2.5 exposure, which means with more exposure there are more negative health outcomes.

Residents continue to call on U.S. Steel (USS) and County Executive Rich Fitzgerald to take decisive action regarding environmental performance at its Mon Valley Works Facilities (Clairton Coke Works, Edgar Thomson Works and Irvin Works) because of its impact on Allegheny County and especially Mon Valley residents. In addition:

- USS should take action to voluntarily reduce operations when severe weather is expected to negatively impact air quality and public health.
- USS should significantly reduce its emissions in the Mon Valley during multiday inversion episodes, since PM levels as measured at Liberty were on average three times higher than those measured upwind and exceeded the standard three days in a row in this latest episode. A 50% emissions reduction could eliminate these exceedances entirely.
- USS should make the significant investments in its Mon Valley facilities that it promised in May 2019 in order to secure employment for its workforce and stop the acute pollution episodes during inversion weather events as well as chronic, ongoing pollution episodes from upsets, leaks and failures.
- USS should restore past promises of local investment and focus efforts on ending severe pollution events.
- The County Executive needs to speak out and show leadership to protect the health of county residents by demanding changes at USS to prevent these periodic, damaging events.

"Even when it's a nice sunny day, U.S. Steel manages to ruin it," says Glassport resident David Meckle. "We have to put up with low-grade headaches, eyes watering and a little burn in the nasal passages. You have to be like a little turtle and go inside and hide. I'm not a turtle and I don't like living in my shell."