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Breathe Project Responds to Allegheny County's Premature Victory Lap on Air Quality

Allegheny County released a statement today proclaiming, "Federal Air Quality Standards Attained at All Eight Monitors for First Time Ever."

"While news of reductions in air pollution in our county is always welcomed, the Breathe Project wants to make it clear that any victory celebrations would be premature and potentially misleading because of the particular circumstances in the data released in the county's statement," said Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the Breathe Project.

For residents in the Mon Valley who spoke out in 2020 at air rally events, there was little relief from weather-related inversions and pollution exceedances during the past year. "The experiences of county residents in 2020 hardly point to successes in air pollution progress," said David Meckle, a resident of Glassport. "We have to put up with low-grade headaches, eyes water a little burn in the nasal passages."

First and foremost, the 2020 data used in the county's release is considered preliminary by the USEPA. This means that the 2020 data has not been quality assured through the EPA's process that usually takes several months. The true picture for 2020's data will be available later this spring when the qualified data are released. Relying upon unqualified data for policymaking purposes could result in miscommunication about the true state of the region's air.

Second, the statement about no significant reductions in industrial production does not square with public statements about such reductions. It has been documented that the Clairton Coke Works has hot idled batteries beginning in November 2019¹ and shut down the Edgar Thomson

¹ U.S. Steel hot idling a battery at Clairton Coke Works," WPXI.com. Available Online: <https://www.wpxi.com/news/top-stories/clairton-coke-works-us-steel-hot-idling-a-battery-at-clairton-coke-works/1004111989/>, accessed January 20, 2021.

Blast Furnace Number 1 (the larger capacity blast furnace) in the period of April² – June 2020³. These reductions were driven by reduced market demand for products that preceded the need for a Covid-19 pandemic response. So any pollution conditions reported for 2020 must be viewed with these changes in mind.

Third, for the 2020 period, during which the Clairton Coke Works has been apparently operating at reduced levels beginning in November 2019,⁴ the state's 24-hour H₂S standard was still exceeded at least 26 days at the Liberty monitor, based on preliminary data.⁵

Our county regularly sees exceedances of the state's 24-hour H₂S standard specifically at the Liberty monitor in proximity to the Clairton Coke Works and integrated Mon Valley Works facilities, all of which use coke oven gas generated at the Clairton Coke Works. According to ACHD's own report, our region has experienced nearly 50 days per year on average over the past 20 years (1999 – 2019) where the Liberty monitor recorded exceedances of the 24-hour H₂S standard.

More notably, there have been no noticeable improvements in meeting this standard over this 20-year period of time. The average number of days with exceedances over the past five years is 51 days. The range spans between 35 and 85 days per year over this five-year period. This is nearly identical to the range over the past 20 years.⁶ This alone tells us that something about the existing regulatory, enforcement, and inspection framework is not working.

The SmellPGH app recorded over 19,000 smell complaints in 2020 despite notable reductions in traffic pollution. The vast majority of these complaints attach the descriptors, "rotten egg," "sulfur," and "industrial," all of which correspond with H₂S and SO₂ emissions from coke oven gas.

² "US Steel to cut capacity at Mon Valley, possibly elsewhere: sources," S&P Global Platts.com. Available Online: <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/metals/042420-us-steel-to-cut-capacity-at-mon-valley-possibly-elsewhere-sources>, accessed January 26, 2021.

³ "US Steel restarts Mon Valley blast furnace," Argusmedia.com. Available Online: <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2112941-us-steel-restarts-mon-valley-blast-furnace>, accessed January 26, 2021

⁴ "U.S. Steel hot idling a battery at Clairton Coke Works," WPXI.com. Available Online: <https://www.wpxi.com/news/top-stories/clairton-coke-works-us-steel-hot-idling-a-battery-at-clairton-coke-works/1004111989/>, accessed January 20, 2021.

⁵ "Mon Valley Residents Suffer Another Bout of Bad Air as Allegheny County Sees 3 More Air Quality Exceedances," GASP Blog, December 14, 2020. Available Online: <https://gasp-pgh.org/2020/12/14/mon-valley-residents-suffer-another-bout-of-bad-air-as-allegheny-county-sees-3-more-air-quality-exceedances/>, accessed January 20, 2021.

⁶ ACHD, "2019 Air Quality Annual Report. Available Online: https://www.alleghenycounty.us/uploadedFiles/Allegheny_Home/Health_Department/Resources/Data_and_Reporting/Air_Quality_Reports/2019-Air-Quality-Annual-Report.pdf, accessed January 20, 2021.

The experiences of county residents in 2020 hardly point to successes in air pollution progress. In response to a county-wide bad air episode spanning November 2 – 9, 2020, a period corresponding with increased temperatures and atmospheric temperature inversions that trapped pollution over the region and during which the Liberty monitor exceeded the daily PM 2.5 standard three times and the Avalon monitor two times,