



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Air Quality in SWPA Backslides on Particles, Improves on Ozone

PITTSBURGH – The American Lung Association "2023 State of the Air (SOTA)" report released today shows that the 12-county Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton, PA-OH-WV metro area, driven by Allegheny County's ongoing poor performance, slipped to 20th worst out of 223 areas in the U.S. for short-term particle exposure.

Last year the region was 22nd worst. The reason: There were more bad air days (8.2 days/year) in the 2019 – 2021 period than in the previous report (7.7 days/year). There had been a trend of improvement over the past several years for short-term exposure until this current report, which shows some backsliding. **The region still retained its F rating for short term particle exposure and maintained its dubious distinction of having the worst air quality performance east of Denver in the United States.** Short-term spikes in particle pollution and ground level ozone (known as smog) inflict serious health burdens on people, causing asthma, cardiovascular damage and respiratory diseases.

For long-term particle exposure, the region barely maintained its passing grade despite worse performance than last year. The annual average of 11.2 ug/m³ was worse than the 11.1 ug/m³ from last year, both years just making it under the 12 ug/m³ standard. On this measure, the region maintained its ranking of 14th worst out of 200 regions, the same as last year. The region was the third worst east of Phoenix, with Indianapolis and Detroit ahead of Pittsburgh.

For ozone, the region received its first passing grade, a "C" for ozone. The region received this grade because it still had 2 days exceeding the ozone exposure standard.

The EPA is embarking on improving these standards, which are more than a decade old. The results would be failing grades if the EPA approves updates to the new standards next year.

Pittsburgh remains one of the most challenging places to live with asthma in the country. Children living near smokestack pollution sources in communities like Clairton, Woodland Hills and Allegheny Valley have as high as a 1 in 4 rates of having asthma. An additional 10 percent of children are at risk of developing asthma, according to [a study published in the Journal of Asthma](#) by Dr. Deborah Gentile in 2020, a period that includes data in this American Lung Association report.

The concerns (and complaints) surrounding our region's historically poor air quality have been a source of serious environmental advocacy for decades with long-standing nonprofits fighting this pollution and the creation of technologies to capture data and report poor air days as well as rallies, marches and grassroots-led air quality town halls.

Nine Southwest Pa. Resident-led Town Halls on air quality have been held since 2022, bringing together more than a thousand people, many residents of environmental justice communities, to discuss the impact of pollution on their health and well-being. Town Hall #10 will feature Chief Darryl Jones, who heads the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire and is the city's Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator and will discuss what will happen if and when an East Palestine derailment happens in the City of Pittsburgh.

Beaver County residents, currently facing a risk of carcinogenic emissions from the Shell Petrochemical Plant that started up late last year, performed slightly worse than last year for short term particle pollution because of a slight increase in the number of bad air days, retaining a grade of C. Year-round and annual particle pollution received a passing grade, and ozone earned a grade of B.

The American Lung Association is calling on President Biden to urgently move forward on several measures to clean up air pollution nationwide, including new pollution limits on ozone and particle pollution and new measures to clean up power plants and vehicles. See the full report results and sign the petition at [Lung.org/SOTA](https://www.lung.org/SOTA).

Comments from Air Quality Advocates

Edith Abeyta, North Braddock Residents for Our Future

"As a fence-line resident of two toxic ten polluters in Allegheny County, it's no surprise the region's air quality is bad. Legacy industrial polluters, lack of enforcement and complicit elected representatives also deserve Fs."

Howard Rieger, Southwest Pennsylvania Resident-Led Town Halls, East End Neighbors: *fight air pollution*

"Reports of failing grades for air quality are just numbers on a page until one confronts the death and disability that plagues those who live in our environmental justice communities, most often located closest to the greatest sources of pollution. Rather than galvanizing our civic, governmental, corporate, healthcare, academic and technical assets to solve the problem, they prefer to sweep the excess mortality that comes with living here under the rug. Until that changes, Greater Pittsburgh will never realize its full potential."

Matt Mehalik, Breathe Project

"Our region continues to experience too many bad air days. This pollution is harmful to all of our region's residents. Despite U.S. Steel's shutting down three highly polluting batteries recently, our region still experiences these bad air day episodes, so what is documented in the report, unfortunately, appears to be continuing into the present, and the situation is not acceptable."

Dr. Deborah Gentile, Community Partners in Asthma Care, pediatrician

"These results are disappointing and our county needs to take some serious corrective action to limit exposure to both short and long-term PM2.5. The results show unacceptable levels of short-term PM2.5. Even though we received a D for the long-term PM2.5, experts recognize that the current standard for this parameter is not protective of public health. The EPA is expected to announce in the near future that the long-term PM2.5 threshold will be decreased to 8-10. As such, we will again be out of compliance for this parameter and exposing residents to levels of PM2.5 that are known to increase death and disease severity."

Mark Dixon, Blue Lens

"Once again, the State of the Air in Allegheny County is poor and regulators are not moving fast enough to meaningfully protect community members. Indeed, our region's persistently bad grades don't convey the fullness of our misery. Air pollution means foul odors, more asthma, early death and more expensive

healthcare – particularly for the most vulnerable populations living closest to chronic polluters like U.S. Steel. Even after the 2022 civil penalty of \$1.8M issued by Allegheny County Health Department against U.S. Steel for hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) emissions, our region still reeks of that sulfurous H₂S smell. Indeed, of the 13,000 SmellPGH app complaints submitted since the start of 2022, “rotten eggs” was mentioned over 900 times and “sulfur” over 1800 times. Allegheny County residents deserve better."

About the Breathe Project

The Breathe Project is a coalition of citizens, environmental advocates, public health professionals and academics using the best available science and technology to improve air quality, eliminate climate pollution and make our region a healthy, prosperous place to live. Learn more at www.breatheproject.org.

Information about our Breathe Collaborative partners can be found [here](#).