

“Nonattainment” is an air quality classification that the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) uses. A nonattainment classification means that air quality in a particular area does not meet (or “attain”) a federal outdoor air quality standard. These standards are called National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS).

When an area’s monitored air pollution exceeds the NAAQS a certain number of times, EPA designates it as a nonattainment area. The state must then develop and implement strategies to return the area to clean air status as soon as possible.

### **Pollutants and standards**

The federal Clean Air Act directs EPA to create and regularly update outdoor air quality standards for six common air pollutants that harm the health of people and the environment:

- Particulate matter (also sometimes called PM<sub>2.5</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub> or particle pollution).
- Ground-level ozone (O<sub>3</sub>).
- Carbon monoxide (CO).
- Sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>).
- Nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>2</sub>).
- Lead (Pb).

EPA must update the standards for each of these pollutants on a regular schedule. The standards must be based on the latest and best science, and set at levels that protect human health – including vulnerable populations. Where the air is unhealthy, states are required to clean it up.

In Washington, the two pollutants of most concern are fine particles (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) and ozone (which forms smog).

### **Measuring air pollution**

States must operate rigorous air quality monitoring networks to measure air pollution levels in outdoor air. Air monitors collect measurements continuously to determine these levels. The

#### **WHY IT MATTERS**

The purpose of air quality standards is to protect public health. If an area is not meeting the standards, it means the air is unhealthy for people to breathe. A nonattainment designation is the first step toward cleaning up the air.

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#### **More information:**

Standards and plans:  
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/sips/sips.htm>

Specific nonattainment areas:  
[http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/sips/designations/nonattainment\\_areas.htm](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/sips/designations/nonattainment_areas.htm)

#### **Special accommodations:**

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Department of Ecology (Ecology) and local air quality agencies use this information to alert the public to unhealthy conditions, determine and take action on air quality trends, assess the effectiveness of pollution reduction strategies, and make sound policy decisions.

Washington's air quality monitoring information is available to the public on a close to real-time basis at <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/enwiwa/Default.ltr.aspx>. You can visit this site any time to get information on air quality conditions for fine particles and ozone in many areas of Washington.

### **Violating air quality standards**

Ecology uses air monitoring data to determine if air quality in the state meets new or revised standards. Based on this data, Ecology can make recommendations to EPA about how to designate areas of the state. EPA will make the final decision about how to designate each area. Possible designations are:

- Attainment (meeting a standard).
- Nonattainment (not meeting a standard).
- Unclassifiable (not enough information to designate).

Each designation is for a specific air quality standard. An area can be in attainment for one standard, but nonattainment or unclassifiable for another.

Standards are set in such a way that one or two bad air quality days – or even an unusual year or season – may not lead to nonattainment. But if monitoring data show that pollution levels are consistently above the standard, an area can be designated nonattainment for that pollutant.

### **Effects of nonattainment**

A nonattainment designation triggers requirements under the federal Clean Air Act to reduce pollution levels and bring the area back into clean air status. These requirements can have serious economic impacts on the community. In nonattainment areas, new or expanding businesses that release air pollution must apply the most strict and costly air pollution controls available. If a business increases pollution, it must offset that increase by reducing equal amounts of pollution from other sources in the nonattainment area. Some effects of these requirements on businesses are:

- Increased costs.
- Less likelihood of investment in new facilities.
- A compromised economic climate.

Due to these requirements, a nonattainment designation may prompt businesses to locate their operations elsewhere, taking jobs and potential revenue from the region. Tourism could also be negatively affected by nonattainment because of the perception the area has "dirty air." In addition, local governments must devote scarce resources to develop and implement strategies that help clean up the problem. Depending on the sources of the pollution, the public may also be asked to make some changes in their habits – such as driving less, reducing the use of wood stoves and fireplaces, or reducing the use of gasoline-powered lawn and garden equipment.

Nonattainment areas that don't clean up their air pollution could receive cuts in federal transportation funding if new highway projects could add to the air pollution problem. Plus, EPA could withhold all or part of the grant funds it provides to the state to support air quality programs.

### **Air quality in Washington**

Washington's air has been getting cleaner over the past two decades. But new scientific studies show people can suffer health effects from even lower levels of air pollution. This new knowledge is leading to revised standards for some air pollutants. New, more protective standards are expected to lower pollution levels, which will reduce the amount of preventable diseases and associated health-care costs.

EPA toughened the standard for fine particle pollution (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) in December 2006. Based on that revised standard, EPA designated a large area of Pierce County in and around Tacoma as nonattainment in December 2009. Ecology, the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, and local communities are now working to develop strategies that will reduce the amount of PM<sub>2.5</sub> in that area.

Air monitors are also measuring pollution levels above or close to the PM<sub>2.5</sub> standard in other Washington communities. Yakima currently violates the standard and is expected to be designated nonattainment. Darrington, Vancouver, Marysville, Wenatchee, and Clarkston are close to a violation; so it is a good idea to put strategies in place now to prevent a violation in those communities.

EPA will review the ozone standard again in 2013. Some Washington areas could be at risk of violating a more protective ozone standard.