

Focus on: Fighting ozone in the Tri-Cities



Federal air standards

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has set national standards for six of the most common forms of air pollution, known as “criteria pollutants.”

The standards are intended to protect human health. State environmental regulators and local clean air agencies are required to monitor for these pollutants, and take action if levels of the pollutants exceed the standards. The criteria pollutants are:

- Carbon monoxide (CO)
- Lead (Pb)
- Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂)
- Ozone (O₃)
- Particulates (PM)
- Sulfur dioxide (SO₂)

Contact information

Kathy Taylor, Air Quality program manager,
(360) 407-6880
kathy.taylor@ecy.wa.gov

Ozone in the Tri-Cities threatens lives, economy

Ground-level ozone is an air pollution problem typically found around major cities choked with traffic. So when a Washington State University atmospheric model in 2012 predicted an ozone hotspot in the Tri-Cities area – home to fewer than 300,000 people – it came as a surprise. The Washington Department of Ecology conducted a mobile monitoring study in 2014 that confirmed that the region’s high hills and prevailing winds allowed ozone to build up on hot summer days.

Left unchecked, these ozone levels could pose a significant risk to the health of Tri-Cities residents. Ozone worsens asthma and contributes to breathing difficulties. Damage could also be done to the region’s economy: If ozone levels exceed federal air quality standards, new regulations, oversight and requirements could impair economic development and investment.

In 2018 and 2019, an Ecology grant sponsored a public education campaign to help Tri-Cities residents understand how and why ozone forms in the area, and how they can reduce this harmful air pollution. Ecology also worked with Washington State University scientists to develop a prediction tool, offering residents a warning when conditions favor ozone formation.

Tri-Cities residents: The future is in your hands

Ozone is not inevitable. Ozone forms when nitrogen oxides from diesel vehicles, industry, and other sources combine with volatile organic compounds from solvents, vapors, and natural sources.

When high ozone is in the forecast, simple steps can reduce those ozone precursor chemicals and keep the air clean. Taking the bus, carpooling, or telecommuting are some of the best tools in the ozone prevention kit.

Ben Franklin Transit jumps on board

Because reducing vehicle trips is such an important part of controlling ozone, Ecology is partnering with the local experts in providing Tri-Cities residents with an alternative to their single occupancy vehicle: Ben Franklin Transit.

With a \$100,000 grant for 2019-2021, Ecology is helping Ben Franklin Transit fund a commute trip reduction specialist to research, market and expand the agency's existing programs.

With their new hire, Ben Franklin Transit has hit the ground running. The transit agency has launched outreach campaigns and set an ambitious timeline to get the Tri-Cities community involved with commute alternatives, and improving public education about ozone. Ben Franklin's goal: reduce trips from gas & diesel vehicles and lessen traffic congestion to prevent Tri-Cities from reaching nonattainment for ozone by 2022, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is set to review the area's compliance with federal standards.

Ben Franklin Transit's efforts are also getting a boost from the Volkswagen diesel settlement, which has helped the agency purchase five electric, zero-emission transit buses – giving Ben Franklin a head start as it works toward a zero-emission fleet.

The COVID-19 pandemic is altering commuting patterns across the world, and the Tri-Cities is no exception. Ben Franklin Transit is using the pandemic as an opportunity to promote teleworking, and lay the foundation for other alternatives to traditional commuting.

Preventing nonattainment statewide

Although the ozone issues in the Tri-Cities are unique, the community is not alone in facing threats from air pollution. A total of 17 Washington communities are at risk of exceeding federal standards for different types of air pollution. Beginning in the 2021-23 biennium, The Governor's budget proposes an increase to the funding available for grants to local communities to prevent nonattainment with federal air quality standards. Under the proposal, grant funding would increase from approximately \$400,000 to \$2 million per biennium. This would allow Ecology to expand the current program and diversify our partnerships with local communities.

Special accommodations

To request ADA accommodation including materials in a format for the visually impaired, call Ecology at 360-407-6831 or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. People with impaired hearing may call Washington Relay Service at 711. People with speech disability may call TTY at 877-833-6341.

