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Regional Air Quality Expected to Improve as Weather Changes

PITTSBURGH – Forecasting by the Health Department indicates that the recent weather that has caused inversions and trapped air pollution close to the ground over the last several days is changing and improvements in air quality are expected.

Allegheny County has experienced extended periods of poor air quality since Thursday, resulting in Air Quality Action Days and warnings for people to limit their exposure to the lingering pollution.

“It saddens me to know that many people across Allegheny County may not have been able to enjoy time outdoors over the last several days because of the poor air quality. Elevated levels of fine particulate matter can negatively impact people’s health,” said Health Department Director Dr. Debra Bogen. “Unfortunately, these types of weather events are expected to increase due to our changing climate. Inversions are expected to become more frequent and last longer in the coming years.”

At the beginning of the year, the Health Department announced a series of steps to combat poor air quality during weather-related events. Those steps included a new air quality regulation aimed at emission mitigation requirements for industry operating in the county during weather-related pollution episodes and building an infrastructure to model and forecast inversion events. Although slowed by the pandemic, these actions remain a priority for the Health Department and work to implement them is ongoing.

The air quality issues recently faced by Allegheny County were experienced in communities across the region. Industrial pollution across the region contributed to the recent poor air quality but so did personal pollution from individual actions such as burning firewood or leaves or using gas-powered lawn and garden equipment like a leaf blower. The Health Department asks that residents refrain from these activities during periods of poor air quality.

An inversion occurs when warm air traps colder air and pollutants near the surface. Inversions tend to be more common during colder months because the sun supplies less warmth to the Earth’s surface, creating a layer of warm air that acts as a lid over the colder air.

There still may be slightly elevated fine particulate concentrations Tuesday morning, but the weather system responsible for the recent inversions is expected to diminish. Rain and a cold front are expected later this week, which should also help improve the air quality.

"Improving air quality in Allegheny County remains a top priority at the Health Department," Dr. Bogen said. "The department will continue to look for innovative solutions toward the goal of clean air for all."

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