



ALLEGHENY COUNTY

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Health Department Announces Efforts to Combat Weather-Related Pollution Events

PITTSBURGH – Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) Interim Director Ronald A. Sugar, Esq., MBA released the following statement regarding the department's plans to combat health-threatening, weather-related pollution events:

"Allegheny County recently experienced strong and lengthy temperature inversions as a result of an extended period of extreme weather conditions including light wind speeds, heavy fog, and a significant warm front. Temperature inversions alter the profile of the local atmosphere and tend to trap pollutants closer to the surface.

"We know from research that inversions are expected to get worse with climate change. We're seeing that first-hand here. From 2008-2018, there were four similar weather-related events that occurred in Allegheny County. In 2019, severe weather inversions happened twice – one episode in February and the most recent one last month. Prior to December's inversions, the county was on track for the second year in a row – and in our history – to be in compliance with air quality standards. That accomplishment is now at risk. While the county may still attain the EPA standard in accordance with its recently submitted State Implementation Plan (SIP), the Health Department (ACHD) recorded exceedances of the 24-hour PM_{2.5} federal National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) at the Liberty Monitor for six consecutive days. From Saturday, December 21, through Thursday, December 26, higher pollution readings were also recorded at other monitored sites across the county. On December 24 and 25, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection issued an Air Quality Action Alert for citizens in the Clairton and Liberty communities.

"ACHD recognizes that the increasing frequency of these temperature inversions is associated with climate change. We also recognize that industry isn't the only contributor to poor air quality as things like vehicle exhaust have a significant impact upon pollution. While we will continue to advocate for residents to do what they can to reduce emissions, we must also explore new regulations that would impose corrective action requirements on industry during short-term pollution events. These extended exceedances and higher pollution levels are a clear threat to the health of the county's residents, but ACHD's current regulations do not provide options to address this issue.

"Over the past few years, ACHD has added legal, management and professional staff, including field inspectors and permitting professionals, to its Air Quality Program. Building on those successes, we will continue to increase our enforcement capabilities for all permitted facilities in Allegheny County. Information system upgrades have also been ongoing to provide staff with additional tools.

The charge to protect the public's health is an important one - Air Quality staff is expected to work efficiently and effectively to manage the permitting, enforcement, planning, and monitoring functions of the program. With additional tools, the residents of the county benefit. This continued investment will ensure the improved compliance of facilities with existing permits and further reduce air pollution.

"Additionally, ACHD will be taking the following steps to improve air quality as it relates to temperature inversions to further combat climate change:

"First, ACHD will propose a new air quality regulation in 2020 aimed at emission mitigation requirements for industry operating in the county during weather-related pollution episodes. While the process to develop these regulations will not be quick, the goal is to have emission reduction plans in place that could be implemented within 24 hours of notice from ACHD that a public health hazard exists.

“Secondly, and concurrent with the development of emission mitigation regulations, ACHD will build an infrastructure to model and forecast inversion events as a necessary component for effective policy implementation. Enhanced meteorological forecasting is a key element of this strategy. The expectation is that there will also be additional public notifications that will be possible.

“Lastly, the Health Department will continue to engage elected officials at the local, state and federal level to ensure comprehensive and workable solutions are advanced for improving air quality in the region. Through these partnerships, ACHD will continue to recommend and assist in the development of policy solutions to provide additional tools to the department. House Bill 1752, sponsored by Rep. Austin Davis, is just one example of that work. A companion bill has also been introduced by Sen. Katie Muth in the Senate. The legislation would increase fines for facilities found to exceed established pollution thresholds and require industry to notify affected communities of potential health impacts when unforeseen accidents compromise facilities’ pollution controls.

“The improvement of air quality in Allegheny County continues to be a high priority for ACHD. With innovative and forward-thinking policy solutions, we will continue to prioritize the health of the public and improve our communities.”

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