Smog pollution robs hundreds of thousands of Americans with asthma and other respiratory ailments of quality of life. It sends thousands of children to emergency rooms each year and costs us billions in healthcare costs, lost productivity, and premature deaths.

Thankfully, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has proposed updated air quality standards for smog (or ground-level ozone), as required under the Clean Air Act.

In the hot summer months, while many families are looking forward to spending time outdoors, hundreds of thousands of parents are dreading the dangerous, sometimes deadly air pollution that can trigger asthma attacks in their kids.

Sierra Club and countless public health experts are calling on EPA to adopt the most protective standard possible. Americans deserve to know if our air is safe or not, and we count on the EPA to issue standards that will truly protect our health.

SMOG AND HEALTH

According to the American Lung Association (ALA), inhaling smog pollution is like getting a sunburn on your lungs and often results in immediate breathing trouble. Long term exposure to smog pollution is linked to chronic asthma and other respiratory and lung diseases, reproductive and developmental harm, and even premature death.

Children are at the greatest health risk from air pollution because they are more likely to be active outdoors and their lungs are still developing. Asthma strikes nearly one out of every 10 school children in the United States and is the number one health issue that causes kids to miss school. On “bad-air days” or “air alert days,” particularly during the warmer months, kids with asthma are forced to stay indoors to avoid aggravating their condition.
SMOG AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Smog pollution from power plants disproportionately affects communities of color. A 2011 analysis of U.S. populations and air quality found that African Americans and Hispanics were more likely to live in counties that had worse problems with particle pollution. African Americans were also more likely to live in counties with worse ozone pollution. African American children have nearly two times the rates of current asthma as white children and they are four times as likely to die from asthma as white children.1

WE NEED THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE STANDARD

Against the advice of scientists and experts, the current, George Bush-era standard was set at 75 parts per billion (ppb), a level widely recognized by the medical community to be insufficient to protect public health, especially for sensitive populations like children, the elderly and asthmatics.

Nearly 26 million Americans are estimated to have asthma, with 7 million of them being children. According to the EPA, a 60 ppb standard would prevent roughly 1.8 million asthma attacks, 1.9 million missed school days and 7,900 premature deaths.3

In November, the EPA proposed lowering the ozone standard to somewhere in the range of 65 ppb to 70 ppb, while also seeking comment on setting it as low as 60 ppb. This may sound like a narrow range, but when it comes to the health effects of smog pollution—especially on children whose lungs are still developing—in the gap between 60 and 70, many children's lives are at stake.

Modeling of smog pollution health effects looking at 12 cities across the country showed that lowering the acceptable level of smog to 60 parts per billion would save 4 to 5 times as many lives as 70 parts per billion.

New, stronger standards for smog pollution will clean up our air and reduce pollution-related illness; millions of Americans with asthma and other respiratory ailments will breathe easier. Additionally, a stronger standard will spur investment in clean energy technology and create jobs.

We shouldn't play politics when it comes to public health; everyone needs and deserves clean air. We need the EPA to protect us from corporate polluters by setting a standard that is consistent with modern medical science.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Sign up for Sierra Club’s new mobile air alert tool at http://sc.org/airalert. It will send you a text message when the air in your area is unsafe to breathe. Join the tens of thousands who have already submitted comments online urging the EPA to create the strongest possible smog safeguards. Visit the smog pollution section of Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal website to learn more and get involved.

ENDNOTES

1 http://www.stateoftheair.org/2013/health-risks/health-risks-disparities.html
2 http://www.epa.gov/epahome/sciencemb/asthma/HD_AA_Asthma.pdf
3 http://www.epa.gov/ttn/ecas/regdata/RIAs/20141125ria.pdf