ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES NEED A STRONG OZONE STANDARD: 60 PPB

Dangerously high levels of ground level ozone put millions of Americans at risk and disproportionately impact communities of color.

Pulmonologists liken the effects of inhaling dangerous levels of ground level ozone to getting a sunburn on your lungs. Long term exposure is linked to a variety of serious medical conditions, including severe asthma attacks, reproductive and developmental harm, and even premature death. Children are at the greatest health risk from high levels of ozone because they are more likely to be active outdoors and their lungs are still developing.

Air pollution from the power plants that create ozone also disproportionately affects communities of color. A 2011 analysis of U.S. populations and air quality found that African Americans were more likely to live in counties with worse ozone pollution, their children have nearly two times the rates of current asthma as white children, and they are four times as likely to die from it. African Americans and Latinos were also more likely to live in counties that had worse problems with particle pollution, highlighting the cumulative pollution burden these communities disproportionately bear.

The best step the EPA can take to alleviate this environmental injustice is to strengthen the primary National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) from 75 parts per billion to 60 parts per billion (ppb).

SNAPSHOT OF DETROIT, WAYNE COUNTY, MICHIGAN

In places like Detroit, Michigan (Wayne County), African Americans experience nearly four times as many asthma related hospitalizations as their white counterparts.

As shown in the left hand graphs, Wayne County, which has a large African American population, has a significantly higher asthma rate compared to Michigan as a whole. The below chart highlight the severity and frequency of the county’s “bad air days.”

INcidENCES AND FREQUENCY OF DIRTY AIR IN WAYNE COUNTY

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<td>77 ppb</td>
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This issue is not isolated to Michigan, and can be seen across the country. In Newark, New Jersey (Essex County), illustrated in the below graph, the disparities in asthma related emergency room visits between white communities and communities of color are also striking, with African American residents making more than seven times as many visits as their white counterparts.
SNAPSHOT OF NEWARK, ESSEX COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

Just like in the case of Wayne County in Michigan, the graphs above highlight that Essex County has significantly higher asthma rates when compared with New Jersey as a whole, with communities of color again bearing a disproportionate asthma burden. As before, the chart below spotlights the severity and frequency of the county’s “bad air days”.

Ground level ozone is an environmental justice issue that must be addressed with a 60 ppb primary NAAQS. Both the current 75 ppb standard and EPA’s proposed 65 to 70 ppb range leave millions of Americans at risk, many of them children. Numerous public health organizations—including the American Lung Association, the American Thoracic Society, the American Heart Association, the American Public Health Association, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, and EPA’s own Children’s Health Protection Advisory Committee—have publicly stated that any standard above 60 ppb does not adequately protect public health.

A 60 ppb standard would prevent 1.8 million asthma attacks, 1.9 million missed school days, and 7,900 premature deaths each year, as well as provide the public with the most accurate measurement of air safety that medical science has to offer. Many air alert systems across the country are based off the primary NAAQS and setting it higher than what health experts recommend will unnecessarily put lives at risk. People have the right to know if the air is safe outside, especially parents of small children, senior citizens and asthma sufferers. New, stronger standards for ground level ozone will clean up our air and reduce pollution-related illness, correcting a horrible environmental injustice that has been present for decades. A 60 ppb standard will mean millions of Americans of every race and socioeconomic background breathing easier.

ENDNOTES