

ACTION ALERT:

EPA Proposes Less Stringent Particulate Matter Air Quality Standards; New Mexicans could be Victims of a "Double Standard"

by Allyson Siwik, GRIP Executive Director

Opposed by many public health professionals, environmental groups, and agencies across the country as not adequately protecting public health, revisions to the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for particulate matter air pollution were issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in January. "Particulate matter" or PM refers to a mixture of small particles and liquid droplets composed of combustion by-products such as acid nitrates and sulfates, organic chemicals, metals and soil or dust. Coarse and fine particulates are able to penetrate deep into the lungs causing adverse health effects. Exposure to PM has been linked to increased respiratory symptoms such as difficulty breathing or coughing, decreased lung function, aggravation of asthma, development of chronic bronchitis, nonfatal heart attacks, and premature death in people with heart or lung disease (www.epa.gov/oar/particlepollution/health.html).

In proposing the new fine particulate standard, EPA disregarded the advice of its own Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) by not tightening the annual standard. The Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management estimates that 23 - 43 percent fewer Americans would be protected under EPA's proposal rather than the CASAC recommendation.

How does the proposed standard affect New Mexico?

The new coarse particle or dust standard "would leave most (or possibly all) New Mexicans with no limit on the amount of dust in the air they breathe", according to an April advisory notice from the NMED. "The proposed revisions are a roll-back in protections against poor air quality and its adverse effects on health." Exempted from the rule are dust from agricultural and mining activities and unpaved roads, and rural wind-blown dust, many of the sources contributing to PM concentrations throughout the state. Here in Grant County, wind-blown dust from mine tailings and other mining activities would be exempt from the standard.

These exemptions are unprecedented in EPA's NAAQS program. Historically, air quality standards have been set by the EPA at a level to protect public health for all Americans, while the states have the authority to decide which sources must reduce emissions to meet that standard. Mining activities emit metals-laden dust that could be highly toxic and could cause a localized air quality impact. This exemption would preclude regulatory agencies from taking action to prevent exceedances of the PM standards from mining sources and in turn from protecting public health.

Proposed PM Monitoring Rule

The proposed requirements for monitoring of PM concentrations, outlined in a companion rule, further limit public health protection for New Mexicans. Because EPA proposes to restrict monitoring to those areas with a population above 100,000 people, "at least 60% of New Mexico's population would be excluded from health protection," estimates NMED. Monitoring would be prohibited from areas with high rural windblown dust or dust from mining or agri-

cultural activities. Moreover, the rule proposes that monitors can't be sited close to any large emission sources that might cause a localized air quality problem relative to the community as a whole. These limitations applied in their entirety could result in NO monitoring of particulate matter concentrations in New Mexico. EPA has a responsibility under the Clean Air Act for protecting public health across the entire nation, rural and urban areas alike. These exemptions are contrary to the purpose of this law.

Take Action

GRIP submitted comments to EPA by April 17, the end of the public comment period. They can be viewed on our webpage at www.gilaresources.info.

However, you can take action by contacting your Congressional representatives and letting them know of your concerns. Under EPA's revised PM standards and monitoring requirements, New Mexicans could be left without any health protection from particulate matter air pollution and no PM air quality monitoring information. New Mexicans deserve the same level of health protection as other states and urban areas, as well as access to PM air quality information. Some specific comments include:

- ♦ Remove the explicit exemption from the standards for mining and agricultural sources;
- ♦ Require monitoring in all areas regardless of whether the area is rural or urban or has a small population;
- ♦ Delete prohibition from monitoring in areas whose air quality is dominated by concentrations of dust from agriculture, mining, unpaved roads or other sources of rural wind blown dust;
- ♦ Retain the existing standard for annual average dust concentration in order to protect against long-term exposure to high dust levels in rural areas and set the annual fine particulate standard at 13 – 14 ug/m3 as recommended by the CASAC.

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