

March 13, 2008

Nashville must clean up its air

Ozone irritants exceed new standards

By ANNE PAINE
Staff Writer

The amount of lung-irritating ozone in the air in Nashville and around the country will have to be reduced under a new federal standard announced Wednesday.

Industry groups argue that a tighter limit isn't necessary and will cost jobs and billions of dollars. Scientists had advised the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that the change wouldn't go far enough to significantly reduce the heart and asthma attacks from breathing smoggy air and that an even lower level was needed.

About 345 counties nationwide, including several in Tennessee, would not be able to meet the new ozone standard today. They include Nashville-area counties Davidson, Sumner, Wilson and Williamson.

They will all have years to achieve compliance.

Those that don't make the grade could be prevented from locating large new industries or other plants that emit nitrogen oxide and other ozone-creating compounds — or could require more pollution controls.

In the Nashville area, officials might have to prove that any new highway construction project would not add to the problem.

Reductions could come from lowering speed limits to save fuel, which decreases the pollution a vehicle emits, or from banning the idling of vehicles.

Federal requirements already in place — including cleaner diesel and gasoline — should help meet the requirement, but might not do enough, said Rob Raney, pollution control director for the Metro Public Health Department.

"I don't know where folks like us will fall yet," he said. His guess is that the Nashville area, which complies with today's standards, will fail to meet the new ones.

Ozone is a hot-weather pollutant created from a reaction of sunlight and emissions from vehicles, coal-fired plants and certain industries. Reductions in ozone prevent premature deaths and heart attacks and result in fewer hospital and emergency room visits, the EPA says.

The current ozone standard of 0.084 parts per million would drop to 0.075 parts per million under the new regulations. Discussions had ranged from keeping the current standard to moving it to 0.06 parts per million.

"Unfortunately, EPA has chosen to bow to political interests over the public's health by releasing an ozone standard that falls short of the recommendations of doctors and other public health professionals," said Trip Pollard, senior attorney with the nonprofit Southern Environmental Law Center's office in Sewanee, Tenn.

"The fact that more cities than ever are likely to fail to meet even this standard should serve as a wakeup call to all Tennesseans that dirty air is everyone's problem."

Manufacturers alarmed

John Engler, head of the National Association of Manufacturers in Washington, D.C., said the change could have a "devastating" effect on manufacturing jobs and lead to higher gasoline prices.

"Changing the rules now is equivalent to moving the goalposts during the middle of the game," said Engler, NAM's president and CEO.

"EPA's own studies show that ozone levels have dropped by 21 percent since 1980 and continue to decline."

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tennessee, endorsed the standard: "EPA's decision to strengthen the national ozone standard is a step toward cleaner air and better health for Tennesseans, especially the health of children, asthmatics, and the elderly."
