

Charlotte No. 8 on smog list

Annual pollution ranking moves metro area up from No. 13, but state official says the air is getting cleaner.

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Metro Charlotte ranks eighth highest among the nation's smoggiest cities, up from No. 13, the American Lung Association said today in its annual pollution rankings. Rowan County, downwind of Charlotte, placed 13th highest among U.S. counties afflicted by ozone pollution, the group said.

The study attributed the worsening trend, in part, on a tougher national ozone standard adopted in March 2008. The Charlotte region's air itself is generally improving, state officials say. But the Lung Association says the new standard is still too low and that thousands of Charlotteans suffer from asthma and other medical conditions that smog aggravates. It estimates that 175 million Americans live in areas with unhealthy smog levels.

"Clearly we still need to do more, or Charlotte would not still be in nonattainment" of the federal standard, said Deborah Bryan, state executive for the lung association.

Today's rankings are based on air pollution levels from 2005-07 but analyzed under the new standard.

The seven-county area around Charlotte has failed to meet an older, less-stringent ozone limit. That could end up hurting hundreds of local industries and losing the region federal transportation money. Compliance is based on a three-year average of ozone readings. State officials hope that good results this summer – ozone forms in hot, sunny weather – will give the region an extra year, until 2011, to meet the old standard.

If summer brings a lot of smog, however, the Environmental Protection Agency could reclassify metro Charlotte's failure from "moderate" to "serious."

That would have significant consequences for about 200 industries in the region, said Donnie Redmond, planning chief for the N.C. Division of Air Quality. Those industries might have to install expensive new pollution-control devices, and would find it harder to expand their operations.

It would also become harder to attract new industries, which would have to offset their air emissions by reducing emissions elsewhere.

Companies might hesitate to locate near the region for fear the federal government will deem an even larger area to violate ozone standards, said Dave Franchina, a Charlotte lawyer who heads the Regional Air Quality Board.

The board runs a business-led initiative, Clean Air Works! About 110 firms in an eight-county area take part by encouraging employees to car pool, walk or take transit to work on smoggy days. Some change operations to curb ozone-forming emissions.

Ozone "has been a concern, continues to be a concern and is something for which the business community wants to help work toward a solution," Franchina said.

Redmond, the state official, said computer models show the Charlotte region's air will grow significantly cleaner by 2018, as laws requiring cleaner motor vehicles and power plants go into effect. "We think we're going to attain the new standard. The air is getting cleaner," he said. "The issue is, is it happening fast enough in Charlotte?"