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Knox area recognized for bad air — again

Lung association includes Knoxville in its report for fifth consecutive year

By J.J. STAMBAUGH, stambaugh@knews.com
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Yet again, Knoxville and its environs have been named as some of the most polluted chunks of real estate in the country by a national study aimed at identifying threats to public health.

The American Lung Association will announce today that Knox and its surrounding counties have some of the dirtiest air in the nation, posing a serious health threat to the region's inhabitants, organization officials said.

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To local leaders, the ALA's report is something less than a surprise.

"It's pretty much the same as in all the years past," said Lynne Liddington, executive director of Knox County's Air Quality Management Office. "It's a repeat of what it's been."

The 2004 report marks the fifth consecutive year that Knoxville has been recognized for its bad air.

Unlike past "State of the Air" reports, this year's summary analyzes particle pollution in addition to smog or ozone pollution.

"The big concern with particle pollution is that it shortens lives," said Jill Stephens, a program analyst with the National Parks Conservation Association. "This once again shows that the air quality problem in this part of the state is a serious concern."

The ALA ranked the Knoxville metropolitan area as the 12th most polluted swath of the nation in the category of year-round particle pollution. The report ranked the Los Angeles area as the country's worst.

The metro area also came in 9th in a list of urban centers with the worst ozone air pollution and the Morristown-Newport area was in 22nd place.

Knox County was listed as the 15th worst county for annual particle pollution and Sevier County was named as the nation's 11th-worst county for ozone air pollution.

Sevier County Mayor Larry Waters said the ALA's designation came as a surprise to him and questioned how the report's authors drew their conclusions.

Waters said that it's his understanding that all the monitoring stations are set up in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and don't record air quality levels in the lower-lying communities of Pigeon Forge, Sevierville and Gatlinburg.

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"I would have serious questions if they're talking about Sevier County proper," he said. "They should have another monitor so we can get a more accurate reading for what's going on in the higher elevations versus the rest of the county."

According to the report, 55 percent of the country - or 159 million people - live in areas with "unhealthful levels of ozone or particle pollution."

Several other cities in the Southeast United States were also singled out as having bad air, including Atlanta, Birmingham and Raleigh-Durham.

"The threat may be invisible to the human eye, but it is real - and it can kill," said ALA president and chief executive officer John L. Kirkwood in a press release prepared in advance of today's announcement.

"Produced by power plant emissions, diesel exhaust and wood burning, among other sources, particle pollution can be dangerous when it reaches unhealthy levels over a few hours or a few days, as well as with constant daily exposure over a long period of time," the report's summary states.

Particle pollution is described in the report as "complex microscopic bits that are one-thirtieth the width of a human hair" that may cause health problems and "are responsible for tens of thousands of premature deaths in the U.S. each year."

"The dangerous thing about these fine particles is that they are tiny enough to penetrate the body's natural defense system," said Dr. Norman H. Edelman, the ALA's consultant for scientific affairs, in the summary. "This means when you inhale these particles, they embed themselves deep in the lungs. Some may even pass through the lungs to the blood.

"Particle pollution is like an invisible army, wreaking havoc on your body through complicated mechanisms we're still sorting out. Studies link particle pollution to increased risk of asthma attacks, heart attacks and strokes, lung cancer, and premature deaths, to name just a few of the ways this tiny army attacks."

The report used air quality measurements reported to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency by state and local governments.

The report is also critical of the Bush administration's efforts to "roll back key provisions of the Clean Air Act and persistent delays in carrying out the existing provisions."

The ALA has sued the EPA over the agency's decision to reverse a part of the Clean Air Act that would have required older power plants to meet current standards.

Knox and several surrounding counties were recently told they weren't in compliance with federal ozone requirements and were designated as "non-attainment" areas. The designation means that local governments may be forced to implement strict measures to clean up the air.

"On the heels of our being designated as unhealthy areas, (the report) makes it all the more apparent we've got to do something to clean up the pollution," Stephens said.

Stephens also said the EPA "is just beginning" a new process to determine which areas are out of compliance with particle pollution standards.

According to Liddington, Knox County is already looking at different ways to improve air quality, including the possible implementation of a vehicle inspection and maintenance program.

"The EPA didn't dictate that we put in an inspection and maintenance program, but if we find that's the best way to reduce our emissions, then we are definitely going to look at it," Liddington said.

The ALA's full report will be available online this afternoon at www.lungusa.org.

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