

Be Aware of the Air

By Dennis McLerran, Executive Director, Puget Sound Clean Air Agency
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New federal air quality standards for fine particles announced recently by the Environmental Protection Agency could cause several areas in our region to violate those standards and move into non-attainment status for the first time since 1993. Urban areas of our region have air toxics levels that are in the top five percent nationally. And we are concerned about global climate change.

This means we need to pay attention to the quality of our air for the health of our people, our communities and our planet.

Our air is considerably cleaner than it was several decades ago, when business and industry accounted for much of the pollution in our region. They have worked with regulatory agencies to improve their operations and technology and now contribute less than four percent of our air pollution.

Toxic diesel emissions are being reduced significantly through engine retrofits and the use of much cleaner fuels like ultra-low sulfur diesel and biodiesel. The Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, along with partners like the American Lung Association of Washington, is working with school districts, transit agencies, cities and counties, the Ports of Seattle and Tacoma and cruise lines Holland America and Princess to help clear the air.

Reducing air toxics risk from diesel engines remains a challenge with growth in our ports, but we and our partners have a great start on this issue and are increasing the focus on implementing incentive-based emission-reduction programs.

But there is also work that each and every one of us needs to do to help protect and improve the air we breathe. That's because the choices we make in our daily lives – how we get to work and school, how we heat our homes, the equipment we use for yard care and recreation – now produce the majority of air pollution in our region.

The good news, however, is that making some different choices can help protect the air for all of us – and for the generations to come.

A powerful first step is to become “air aware.” Learn more about air quality and how you can make clean air choices on the Clean Air Agency's website, www.pscleanair.org. You can also keep on eye on current air quality and air quality forecasts.

Additional resources can be found on the American Lung Association of Washington's website -- www.alaw.org. -- including the option to subscribe to the Breathe Easy Network, an e-mail air quality forecast service. Last year the lung association provided air quality information to more than 4,000 people who suffer when air quality deteriorates.

We can make a difference – individually and as a community. Whether it's taking one less car trip, using compact fluorescent bulbs, or burning a manufactured firelog instead of wood – taken together, it all adds up to cleaner air and a cooler planet.

Take one small step today – and let's all breathe a little easier.

Marina Cofer-Wildsmith, CEO, American Lung Association of Washington, serves on the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency Board of Directors, with Dennis McLerran, as the agency's Executive Director.

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