

NEW OZONE RULES COULD MEAN MORE NONATTAINMENT AREAS

ON OCTOBER 1, THE U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY tightened the national air quality standard for ground-level ozone from 75 parts per billion to 70. Toledo, Ohio, among other places that currently comply with the standard, could find itself shifting into “nonattainment” again.

Ozone is a health-based standard set largely without regard to the economic costs of compliance. During this recent review, environmentalists pressed for a lower standard (some wanted 60 ppb) while business groups and others wanted to keep it at 75.

Ground-level ozone is largely a summertime pollutant, created on sunny days from volatile organic compounds and oxides of nitrogen (NOx). At certain exposure levels, ozone causes lung and respiratory problems. Controlling ozone levels is a multipronged effort involving regulations of vehicles, factories, and consumer products. Overall, ozone standards have a wide range of economic impacts because they demand new investments in product developments and more stringent pollution control technologies.

State and federal environmental officials will now begin a two-year review to determine which areas of the country comply with the new standard and which areas do not; they will be classified as “attainment” and “nonattainment,” respectively. (See how your own county might fare under the new regime using the *Los Angeles Times* interactive map, tinyurl.com/goplusl, or one from the Business Roundtable, tinyurl.com/glt9b78.)

State environmental officials will lead the designation process, though the focus will be at the county level. Metropolitan counties are frequently grouped together into one “airshed.” These counties are then jointly subject to air pollution controls such as reformulated gasoline or new industrial emission limits.

If a region misses its attainment deadline (they typically have three years from designation to comply) it can be bumped up to the next classification—marginal, moderate, serious, severe, and extreme are the categories—which adds additional controls. (“Get Ahead of the Ozone Curve” offers 10 tips for the designation process at planning.org/webexclusive.)

Based on recent air quality data, EPA estimates there are 241 nonattainment counties. However, since some benefits of recently enacted control programs have yet to emerge, EPA predicts that most areas (except California) can meet its new standard with existing pollution controls. EPA’s critics strongly dispute this, contending that localities will struggle to find programs that deliver final, incremental pollution reductions.

Trouble in Toledo

The Toledo metro area exemplifies the challenges presented by the new standard. EPA estimates Toledo’s ozone level at 71 ppb—nonattainment. Dave Gedeon, AICP, acting vice president of transportation at the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments, says that at least for now, Toledo officials generally agree that existing pollution controls alone will keep ozone trending downward. But, he says, “one bad summer” could bring high temperatures, resulting in higher ozone levels, despite VOC and NOx controls.

Officials there plan to ramp up efforts regarding ozone action days and seek quicker time lines for projects that ease traffic congestion and lower automotive emissions.

So in Toledo and elsewhere, there will be no let-up in existing plans to control the pollutants that form ozone, but no new plans either. They’ll keep their fingers crossed about the weather.

—Tom Ewing

Ewing is a freelance writer specializing in energy and environmental issues.

Congress’s game of “kick the transportation spending bill down the road” ended last month, when legislators passed a new five-year, \$305 billion transportation bill that increases spending on highways by 15 percent and transit systems by 18 percent.

The Obama administration shined a national spotlight on local land-use regulations, expressing concern that zoning and land-use restrictions hinder mobility and income growth for lower- and middle-class Americans. Jason Furman, chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisors, cited a growing body of research showing that cities with stricter zoning rules have higher levels of inequality.

The Pope is taking an interest in planning issues as well. In a November speech in Nairobi, Pope Francis weighed in on urban development’s impact on humans’ quality of life and declared that clean water and adequate housing should be basic human rights.

The threat of a wet winter has compounded Los Angeles’s growing homeless challenges. In October, city officials declared a shelter crisis in anticipation of the storms El Niño will bring. Public buildings will be opened as temporary shelters, and new rules will allow people to sleep inside vehicles in designated lots.

In conjunction with the COP21 conference in Paris, 22 cities (including seven from the U.S.) pledged to dedicate 10 percent of their municipal budgets each year to building resiliency.