

KnoxNews

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: http://www.knoxnews.com/kns/local_news/article/0,1406,KNS_347_1928196,00.html

Knox needs breath of fresh air

Study ranks area 9th among U.S. cities

By MORGAN SIMMONS, simmonsm@knews.com
May 1, 2003

For the fourth consecutive year a nationwide study has recognized Knoxville for its bad air.

In its annual "State of the Air" report released Wednesday the American Lung Association ranks Knoxville ninth among the 25 most ozone air polluted cities in the United States.

Last year Knoxville ranked eighth in the report, and in 2001 the city ranked ninth. In 2000, the first year the report was released, Knoxville ranked 12th.

Janice Nolen, director of national policy for the American Lung Association, said the slight improvements reflected in this year's report versus last year's are most likely because of favorable weather conditions than to new measures to reduce pollution.

"Any improvements in this report is Mother Nature taking it easy on us," Nolen said. "While we're grateful for it, we can't depend on it."

The American Lung Association times the release of its annual ozone report to coincide with the start of the summer ozone season. Ground-level ozone is a colorless, odorless gas that irritates lung tissue and is especially harmful to people with respiratory disease, senior citizens, and children.

This year's State of the Air report ranks Los Angeles as the worst ozone polluted metropolitan area for the fourth year in the row. Atlanta ranked as having the seventh-worst ozone levels in the country, just one place ahead of Knoxville.

Knox County and Blount County were bumped from this year's top 25 most- ozone-polluted county list. However, both counties still received a grade of "F" based on the number of days ozone levels exceeded levels considered safe for human health.

Nolen said that the Southeast region consistently records some of the highest ozone readings in the nation.

"People think of ozone air pollution only being in California, but as far as measuring lower levels over a long period of time, the South has a persistent problem," Nolen said.

The 2003 State of the Air report is based on ozone data collected at local monitoring stations and sent to the EPA for review. Knox County has two ozone-monitoring stations, one at Spring Hill, and one at East Knox County Elementary School.

Ratings were based on the number of days a county's air reached unhealthy levels as described by EPA's Air Quality Index, which breaks air pollution levels into numerical and color-coded ratings with corresponding health advisory statements.

Last summer the Great Smoky Mountains National Park recorded 43 days when ozone levels exceeded the safety threshold. That made 2002 the park's second worst ozone season, topped only by 1999, when the park recorded 52 ozone days.

So far this year the Great Smoky Mountains National Park has had two ozone exceedance days, one on April 12, and one on April 15.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 20 percent of the U.S. population is especially susceptible to ozone. The American Lung Association of Tennessee estimates that in Knox County alone some 4,706 children, and 20,117 adults, suffer from asthma.

The 2003 State of the Air report says ozone levels across the United States dropped significantly throughout the 1980s, thanks to the Clean Air Act, which was instituted in 1970 and updated in 1977 and 1990.

The reports criticizes the Bush administration's pollution plan for delaying and diluting provisions of the Clean Air Act that would force coal burning power plants to reduce their sulfur, nitrogen, and mercury emissions.

The release of the annual report comes less than a week after Knox County hosted a regional clean air summit attended by U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., state air quality experts, and representatives from seven East Tennessee counties.

Lynne Liddington, director of air quality management for Knox County, Knoxville and other area municipalities knows they have to take the initiative if they're going to comply with the new ozone standards passed by EPA.

"It really is a regional problem," Liddington said. "Here in Knox County, we know we can't clean up our air without help from the surrounding counties."

Liddington said Knoxville's proximity to power plants, its mountain topography and its high traffic flow all contribute to an air pollution problem that's out of proportion to the city's size.

Morgan Simmons may be reached at 865-342-6321.

Copyright 2003, KnoxNews. All Rights Reserved.

