

FACT SHEET

EPA RELEASES A REPORT TO CONGRESS ON VISIBILITY IMPROVEMENT

Today's Action

- ! The Environmental Protection Agency is issuing a Report to Congress on visibility improvement in the nation's national parks and wilderness areas.
- ! EPA is required to report to Congress every five years on visibility improvements in the Nation's national parks and wilderness areas, also known as federal Class 1 areas. In developing the current report, EPA analyzed air quality monitoring information available for the 1994 - 1998 time period to assess changes in visibility at 45 of the Nation's 156 parks and wilderness areas.
- ! This report summarizes visibility changes in three categories: number of days each year with average visibility; visibility on the 20 percent haziest days; and visibility on the 20 percent best visibility days. Monitoring data from 28 of the 45 sites showed no change in visibility for all three categories. For most of these sites, visibility has remained unchanged for the past 8 to 10 years.
- ! This analysis showed the following changes over the 1994-1998 time period:
 - < **Conditions improved** at the following six sites on the best days:
 - C Acadia National Park, Maine
 - C Pinnacles National Monument, California
 - C Badlands National Park, South Dakota
 - C Washington, District of Columbia*
 - C Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
 - C Great Sand Dunes National Monument, Colorado
 - < **Conditions improved** at five sites on the haziest days:
 - C Canyonlands National Park, Utah
 - C Pinnacles National Monument, California
 - C Redwood National Park, California
 - C San Gorgonio Wilderness, California.
 - C Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky
 - < **Conditions declined** at three sites on the best-visibility days:
 - C Snoqualmie Pass-Alpine Lakes Wilderness, Washington
 - C Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona
 - C Lye Brook Wilderness, Vermont

* While not a park, data was analyzed and included in the report. This site provides an interesting comparison of urban and rural eastern sites.

- ! EPA is addressing visibility issues through its regional haze program, designed to improve visibility and air quality in the nation's most treasured natural areas, so that these areas may be preserved and enjoyed by current and future generations. The regional haze program also will improve visibility over broad geographic areas, including other recreational sites and cities.

Background & Chronology

- ! Visibility impairment occurs when particles and gases in the atmosphere scatter and absorb light. Without pollution, a natural visual range is approximately 140 miles in the West and 90 miles in the East. But in many parts of the United States, fine particles have significantly reduced the distance people can see. In the West, the current range is 33 to 90 miles, and in the East, the current range is only 14 to 24 miles.
- ! The 1977 Clean Air Act established a national visibility goal of returning visibility to natural ranges and preventing future visibility degradation in 156 important natural areas across the country (35 national parks, 120 wilderness areas, and one international park).
- ! In 1977 Clean Air Act amendments also required EPA to issue regulations to ensure "reasonable progress" toward meeting the national goal.
- ! In 1980, EPA issued its first regulations addressing the visibility. Those regulations focused on visibility problems that could be linked to a single source of pollution, or a small group of sources. At the time, the Agency deferred regulations addressing regional haze issues until monitoring and modeling techniques could be improved, helping EPA better understand the pollutants causing visibility impairment.
- ! In 1988, EPA, along with states and federal land managers (those agencies responsible for sites such as national parks, national forests and other lands), began monitoring fine particle concentrations and visibility in 30 national parks and wilderness areas across the country. The agencies analyze this data to determine what portion of visibility impairment can be attributed to various pollutants in the air, such as sulfates, nitrates, organic and elemental carbon, and soil dust.
- ! In 1990, Congress again amended the Clean Air Act, placing additional emphasis on regional haze issues. Among other actions, the 1990 amendments required EPA to work with several western states to address visibility in the Grand Canyon National Park. EPA established the Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission in 1991. Congress required EPA to issue regional haze regulations within 18 months of receiving the Grand Canyon commission's

recommendations.

- ! EPA's initial report to Congress in 1993, estimated the visibility changes in federal Class I areas that could be expected as a result of the 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act.
- ! In 1996, the Commission delivered its final report to EPA. The report included significant technical analyses and broad-based consensus on strategies to improve visibility in 16 Class 1 areas on the Colorado Plateau.
- ! In 1999, EPA issued regional haze regulations that require states to develop visibility improvement plans. The plans, due from 2003 to 2008, must include goals for improving visibility at each Class 1 area and emission-reduction strategies to meet these goals. EPA is funding five multi-state planning organizations to evaluate the haze problem and to recommend regional approaches to improve air quality.
- ! Over the last two years, EPA has worked closely with state air pollution agencies and federal land managers to expand the visibility monitoring network from 30 to 110 sites. The network is designed to provide data that regionally represents all 156 Class 1 areas.

For more information:

- ! This fact sheet and the related report are available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/oarpg/t1fs.html>, and <http://www.epa.gov/air/visibility/> respectively.
- ! Hard copies of this report are also available from the National Service Center for Environmental Publications (NSCEP). Place an order by phone at (800) 490-9198 or order online at <http://www.epa.gov/ncepihom/>. NSCEP provides one free copy of a document per requestor.
- ! For questions about this report, call Gary Blais at 919-541-3223.