

FACT SHEET

PROPOSED REVISIONS TO AIR QUALITY INDEX REPORTING AND SIGNIFICANT HARM LEVEL FOR FINE PARTICULATE MATTER

ACTION

- On January 15, 2009 EPA proposed to revise the Agency's Air Quality Index (AQI) to update the values states use to report daily concentrations for fine particle pollution, also known as PM_{2.5}, to reflect changes to the fine particle standard made in 2006. The Agency also proposed to set a "significant harm level" (SHL) equal to the proposed AQI value of 500.
- The AQI is EPA's color-coded tool for communicating air quality to the public. AQI values range from 0 to 500. The higher the AQI value, the greater the level of air pollution and the greater the health concern. An AQI value of 50, for example, represents good air quality with little potential to affect public health, while an AQI value over 300 represents hazardous air quality.

Changes to AQI values:

- The proposed changes would set a PM_{2.5} AQI value of 100 (anything above 100 is unhealthy for sensitive groups) at 35 micrograms per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) which is the level of the 24-hour PM_{2.5} standard. An AQI of 150 (above 150 is unhealthy) would be set at 55 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, 24-hour average, in proportion to the proposed revision of the 100 level.
- The proposed rule also would retain the current AQI value of 500, which is 500 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, 24-hour average. EPA is asking for comment on alternative approaches to setting the 500 level of the PM_{2.5} AQI, including approaches used by some states.
- The proposal also would retain AQI values of 200, 300 and 400 at their current levels. The current and proposed concentrations are outlined in the table below:

AQI Category	Index Values	PM _{2.5} 24-hour ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$)	
		Current	Proposed
Good	0 - 50	0.0 - 15.4	No change
Moderate	51 - 100	15.5 - 40.4	15.5 - 35.4
Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	101 - 150	40.5 - 65.4	35.5 - 55.4
Unhealthy	151 - 200	65.5 - 150.4	55.5 - 150.4
Very Unhealthy	201 - 300	150.5 - 250.4	No change

Hazardous	301 - 400	250.5 - 350.4	No change
	401 - 500 (<i>this level used for emergency episode planning only.</i>)	350.5 - 500	No change

Significant Harm Level:

- EPA also is proposing to set a Significant Harm Level (SHL) for PM_{2.5} equal to the proposed AQI value of 500, which is 500 µg/m³. Areas rarely reach PM concentrations of this level.
- An SHL is an important factor used in designing air pollution Emergency Episode Plans, which are required for certain areas of the country. These plans are used to establish procedures for delivering timely information to citizens potentially affected by elevated PM_{2.5} levels, and to curtail emissions from sources in the area that are potentially contributing to harmful PM_{2.5} levels. Emergency Episode Plans are not intended to provide guidance for control of emissions from wildfires and prescribed fires, which can produce high levels of PM_{2.5}.
- EPA will accept public comment for 60 days after the proposal is published in the Federal Register. See “How to Comment” below for commenting instructions.
- The Agency will hold a public hearing on the proposal March 5, 2009 in the Dallas area.

BACKGROUND

- In August 1999, EPA adopted revisions to its pollutant standards index and renamed the index the Air Quality Index, or AQI. These changes included two new reporting requirements, first, to report a pollutant-specific sensitive group statement when the index is above 100, and second, to use specific colors if the index is reported in a color format.

Air Quality Index (AQI) Values	Levels of Health Concern	Colors
<i>When the AQI is in this range:</i>	<i>...air quality conditions are:</i>	<i>...as symbolized by this color:</i>
0 to 50	Good	Green
51 to 100	Moderate	Yellow
101 to 150	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	Orange
151 to 200	Unhealthy	Red
201 to 300	Very Unhealthy	Purple
301 to 500	Hazardous	Maroon

- Daily AQI reporting is required in cities of 350,000 and larger. In addition, states use the AQI to issue voluntary daily air quality forecasts for hundreds of cities, as a public service to their residents. Many states also use the index as a basis for Air Quality Action Days, designed to encourage individuals to reduce their contributions to air pollution.
- Since the 1999 revisions, public awareness and use of the index has grown dramatically. Today, the index can be found in many television weathercasts, in newspapers, and on the AIRNow Web site at www.airnow.gov.
- In addition, to better protect public health and welfare for millions of Americans across the country, EPA, on Sept. 21, 2006, revised the national air quality standards for particle pollution, strengthening the 24-hour fine particle standard from a level of 65 micrograms per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) to 35 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.
- Scientific studies have found an association between exposure to particulate matter and significant health problems, including: premature mortality, increased hospital admissions and emergency room visits, and development of chronic respiratory disease.
- The proposed changes to the AQI today will reflect the improvements to the PM_{2.5} daily standard.

HOW TO COMMENT

- To download a copy of this notice, go to <http://www.epa.gov/pm/actions.html>

Submitting comments to the docket:

- Today's proposed action and other background information are also available either electronically in EPA's electronic public docket and comment system, or in hard copy at EPA's Docket Center, Environmental Protection Agency, Room B-102, 1301 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC (Docket ID No. OAR-2005-0155). The Public Reading Room is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding legal holidays. The telephone number for the Public Reading Room is (202) 566-1744, and the telephone number for the EPA Docket Center is (202) 566-1742.
- EPA will accept comments for 60 days beginning when this proposal is published in the Federal Register. All comments should be identified by Docket ID No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2007-0195 and submitted by one of the following methods:
 - EDOCKET: <http://www.epa.gov/edocket/>. EDOCKET, EPA's electronic public docket and comment system, will be replaced by an enhanced Federal-wide electronic docket management and comment system located at www.regulations.gov. When that occurs, you will be redirected to that site to access the docket and submit comments. Follow the on-line instructions.
 - E-mail (a-and-r-docket@epa.gov);
 - Facsimile (202) 566-1741 and (919) 541-5689;

- U.S. Mail (EPA Docket Center, Environmental Protection Agency, Mail code: 6102T, 1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20460); or
- Hand delivery (EPA Docket Center, Environmental Protection Agency, Room B-102, 1301 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC).
- Please include a total of two copies. More information about comment submission may be found in the proposal notice.

Public hearing

- EPA will hold a public hearing on this proposal from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday, March 5, 2009 at the Intercontinental Dallas, 15201 Dallas Parkway, Addison, Texas.
- To register to speak at the hearing, contact Tricia Crabtree (e-mail (crabtree.tricia@epa.gov) or by telephone at (919) 541-5688.

Blog:

- To provide an additional avenue for public discussion of this proposed rule, EPA will host a blog about the AQI and the proposed changes. EPA anticipates posting the blog the first week of March 2009, to coincide with the public hearing on this proposal.
- While comments posted to the blog will not be considered part of the official record, the blog will offer readers an opportunity to discuss their thoughts on the proposal. The blog also will provide an easy way for readers to submit comments for the record, if they wish to do so. EPA will announce the location of the AQI blog shortly, including details on signing up to be notified when the blog opens.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- To read the proposed rule and to learn more about the revised particle pollution standards, go to <http://www.epa.gov/pm>.
- Information on the Air Quality Index is available at <http://www.airnow.gov/>.