

Lehigh Valley ranks fourth most polluted in state

Numbers worse than Pittsburgh, Philly

By BINGHUI HUANG

Trucks are not only a nuisance on the ground, but also a problem for the air.

The increased truck traffic spurred by the growing warehouse industry is one of the factors driving up air pollution in the Lehigh Valley after decades of air quality improvement, Flora Cardoni, of the advocacy group PennEnvironment said Tuesday at a news conference at the Lehigh County Government Center.

Across the country and in the Lehigh Valley, air quality is declining as vehicle use increases with population growth, enforcement of environmental regulations softens and climate change exacerbates pollution, according to the group's report.

The report shows the Lehigh Valley with more high pollution days than Philadelphia or Pittsburgh but not as many as Lancaster, Harrisburg or Lebanon. Some of that could be attributed to geography, as the region sits in a valley, which traps the air, Cardoni said.

The Lehigh Valley had nearly 100 high pollution days in 2018, making the region the fourth worst in the state, according to the report. In Pennsylvania, the biggest polluters are industrial plants and coal mines, followed by electricity production and then transportation, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

"The bottom line is we can't choose whether or not to breathe the air, but we can choose to make the air better," Cardoni said. "And the health of our community depends on it."

The hourlong event included remarks from elected officials, and advocacy groups, including Lehigh County Executive Phillips Armstrong, Northampton County Council member Tara Zrnski who is running for state representative, and Armando Jimenez, a community organizer at Make the Road PA.

Pollution-related illnesses range from heart disease to respiratory problems, cancer and unhealthy newborns.

For decades, air quality improved with environmental regulations such as the Clean Air Act that set standards for various industries. But in the last few years, the trend stalled and even reversed, said Cardoni, climate defender campaign director at PennEnvironment.

The findings mirror American Lung Association data, which shows the Lehigh Valley's air quality improving for decades and then stagnating

around 2013. In its 2019 air quality report card, the association gave Lehigh County a D and Northampton County an F. The association's research found that from 2016 to 2018, the number of Americans living in areas where pollution was high for more than 100 days increased nearly 50% to 108 million. Air pollution was mostly caused by car and truck traffic, electricity use, factories, heating and wildfires.

One way climate change plays a role is in the frequency of wildfires. In 2018, California wildfires were the deadliest and most destructive in the state's, burning nearly 2 million acres and killing more than 100 people. Australian wildfires that began in 2019 continue to burn, killing an estimated 1 billion animals and prompting air quality to drop to hazardous levels.

"Hotter, drier weather will increase the frequency of severity of wildfires, which create particulate pollution, contribute to smog, and can spread air pollution for hundreds of miles," the PennEnvironment report stated.

Officials at the event emphasized the need for renewable energy standards, pollution regulations and enforcement and better public transportation as well as walking and biking options to reduce car traffic.

Zrnski said only a small percentage of the region's energy is in renewable sources, despite the capacity to switch to these options.

But state officials are trying change that.

Gov. Tom Wolf ordered his administration last October to work on regulations to bring Pennsylvania into a consortium of states that sets a price on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants and lowers the amount they can emit.

Attorney General Josh Shapiro also joined a coalition of 22 states and the District of Columbia to sue to block the federal rollback of Clean Car Standards.

Armstrong said efforts must be made at every level, including the choices individual people make in their energy use. He said governments and environmental groups must work together to "make sure we're inhaling breathable air."

Jimenez said the focus should be on big industries instead of individuals, many of whom cannot afford to buy cars and food that are better for the environment.

The fight has to be at the government and industry level, he said.

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