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U.S. may put Triad on its 'dirty air' list

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Guilford could be one of 41 North Carolina counties named to a federal “dirty air” list next year.

Air quality has improved, but stricter federal benchmarks on ozone mean the Triad doesn't measure up for now, said Patrick Reagan, who oversees air quality monitoring for the Forsyth County Environmental Affairs Department.

The designation could derail road projects or curtail industry relocating to the area if such projects could adversely affect pollution levels, said Tom Mather, a spokesman with the state Division of Air Quality.

The state recommended this week the following area counties be included: Guilford, Rockingham, Alamance, Forsyth, Davidson and Caswell and parts of Randolph.

Air-quality monitors show that counties on the list have higher concentrations of ozone than now recommended.

Ozone is oxygen with a third atom that attracts harmful pollutants emitted by vehicles, factories and power plants. In the upper atmosphere, ozone protects the Earth from the sun's damaging rays.

“But at ground level, those same properties can make it harmful,” Mather said.

High ozone levels can cause respiratory problems and can degrade buildings, paint and rubber tires, for example. Hot, dry weather worsens the effect, which is why air-quality alerts often crop up in the summer.

MORE ONLINE

Check out the Triad's daily “Air Quality Index” at www.co.forsyth.nc.us. Click on “environmental affairs” then the link to the index. The index, color-coded from green (good) to purple (very unhealthy), tracks five major air pollutants regulated by the Clean Air Act: ground-level ozone, particle pollution, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide.

COMMENTS

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Federal air regulators, who must review regulations every five years, recently tightened restrictions on how much ozone can be present at ground level.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency must finalize by March 2010 its list of areas not complying with the new rules.

But state and local efforts to improve air quality mean most of the North Carolina counties likely will come off the list within two years, Mather said.

“The trend we’ve been seeing is pretty clear,” he said. “Emissions are going down; air-quality measurements are improving.”

Initiatives in the Triad

include promoting mass transit and using eco-friendly alternative fuels, such as biodiesel or hybrid electric for government vehicles, Reagan said.

Those and other efforts have paid off in the form of fewer air-quality alerts, he said.

In the 1990s, the Triad would see 30 or more orange alerts in a season that air was unhealthy for sensitive groups. That’s now down to 10 or 12, he said.

“Just from those numbers alone,” he said, “you can see the air quality is getting better.”

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