

Metro Denver Air Quality: Past Achievements, Future Challenges



Regional Air Quality Council

The Regional Air Quality Council (RAQC) is the lead air quality planning agency for the seven-county metropolitan Denver region.

In existence since 1989, the RAQC serves to develop efficient and cost-effective air quality planning initiatives with input from local governments, the private sector, stakeholder groups, and citizens of the Denver metro region.

Specifically, the RAQC is responsible for developing plans for implementation, maintenance, and enforcement of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) within the Denver region. The RAQC is also charged with developing and administering public education and outreach programs regarding air quality in the metro area.

The RAQC is governed by a nine-member board appointed by the the Governor. It is composed of local elected officials, business representatives and citizens, and state cabinet officials. RAQC actively involves a wide range of the Denver-area community through its stakeholder involvement process. ■

Air Quality Achievements

The metro Denver region made history on August 9, 2002, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved the region's request to be redesignated as an "attainment area" for small particulate matter, also know as PM10. This completed a three-year process of gaining attainment designations for all criteria pollutants.

After years of violating federal health standards for carbon monoxide (CO), PM10, and ozone, the Denver region currently stands as the first major metropolitan city in the nation to reach attainment for all federal, health-based air quality standards after violating five of six NAAQS.

Even while the region celebrates this historic air quality achievement, new challenges are on the horizon. EPA has developed two new, health-based air quality standards for ozone and fine particulate matter, also known as PM2.5.

The Denver region expects to stay under the PM2.5 standard more easily than the ozone standard. However, there is a strong relationship between PM2.5 and the "Brown Cloud," so state and regional air quality officials are taking proactive efforts – such as a voluntary diesel emission reduction program – to limit PM2.5 emissions.

In addition, stakeholders are working on implementing new strategies to make sure the region reaches attainment for the new, stricter 8-hour ozone standard by 2007. ■

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Regional Air Quality Council
1445 Market Street, Suite 260
Denver, CO 80202

303-629-5450 | www.raqc.org

Ozone Challenges

EPA's new 8-hour ozone standard, which is tougher to meet than the previous 1-hour standard, poses challenges for the region over the next few years.

In July 2003, the region experienced elevated ozone levels, pushing three metro-area monitors over the new 8-hour standard. This past April, EPA implemented the new standard nationally and designated the seven county metro-Denver region – as well as portions of Larimer and Weld Counties – a deferred nonattainment area, pending the successful outcome of the region's ozone planning process. The region is now at risk of a potential future nonattainment designation if proactive steps are not taken.

In anticipation of EPA's stricter standard, Gov. Owens directed the RAQC and Air Quality Control Commission (AQCC) to explore further measures to ensure compliance of the 8-hour standard. One of the measures identified by stakeholders includes an agreement with EPA – the Early Action Compact.

The Early Action Compact (EAC) is an agreement with EPA, the state, and regional agencies, which allows a region to submit an enforceable State Implementation Plan (SIP) outlining steps the region will take to reach compliance with the ozone standard. In return, EPA will defer any potential nonattainment designation and give the area until 2007 to demonstrate attainment of the standard.

The EAC was signed by the RAQC, AQCC, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Colorado Department of Transportation, Denver Regional Council of Governments, and EPA in December 2002. Larimer, Weld, Morgan, and Elbert Counties joined the Compact in early 2004.

The RAQC convened a stakeholder process to allow interested parties to participate and provide input on ozone mitigation strategies. The group discussed a variety of ozone-reduction strategies, looking at mobile sources, point sources, and an expansion of the RAQC's existing ozone education program. The final plan – encompassing a myriad of reduction strategies – was adopted by the AQCC in March 2004 and approved by the General Assembly in May. The Governor submitted the plan to EPA in July.

For the past six years, local governments have been a significant partner in the RAQC's Voluntary Ozone Reduction Program by participating in programs such as the "Stop at the Click" campaign, "Put a Cap on Ozone," "Mow Down Pollution," Car Care Clinics for Cleaner Air, in addition to coordinating with city departments to make changes in operational procedures and to help spread the word about ozone pollution. The RAQC looks forward to continuing to work with local governments as it expands its outreach and education efforts beginning next year.

For more information about the ozone planning process or the Early Action Compact, contact the RAQC at (303) 629-5450. ■

Diesel Outreach

Although the region is currently meeting federal standards for particulate matter, it still struggles with its wintertime visibility problem known as the "Brown Cloud," of which 25-40 percent is caused by emissions from diesel vehicles. To help reduce such emissions from heavy-duty diesel trucks and school buses, the RAQC launched *Clean Air Fleets* (CAF) in June 2003, focusing on voluntary initiatives by both public and private, on- and off-road diesel fleet operators to reduce emissions.

To date, CAF has been successful in providing retrofit and/or alternative fuel funding to nearly 30 public and private companies. In addition, the program launched with a successful Clean Diesel Conference, which brought together nearly 100 private and public fleet operators to learn about best maintenance practices and pollution reduction technologies and fuels.

Last fall, RAQC received funding from EPA to create a spinoff program of CAF, *Clean Yellow Fleets for Blue Skies* (CYFBS), working specifically to retrofit school buses. There are 16 Front Range school districts participating in the program, which will be launched in October 2004 – Children's Health Month.

For more information on CAF or CYFBS, visit the web site at www.cleanairfleets.org or contact Sara O'Keefe at (303) 629-5450, ext. 220. ■

Repair Your Air Campaign

After several earlier studies concluded that smoking and high-emitting vehicles contribute a disproportionate amount of particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), carbon monoxide (CO), and hydrocarbons (HC) in the Denver area, the RAQC formed a Smoking and High-Emitting Vehicle Work Group to explore opportunities to reduce emissions from these vehicles. The Work Group recommended that a pilot smoking and high-emitting vehicle program be implemented.

The Repair Your Air Campaign, a partnership between the RAQC and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), was launched in Spring 2003 to identify high-polluting vehicles using remote sensing technology and to repair vehicles, in an attempt to reduce ozone pollution in the Denver area.

Vehicle owners whose vehicles qualify for the program are notified via mail with an informational letter and a coupon to participate. Vehicle owners are eligible for \$500 in emissions-related repairs at participating repair shops around the metro area.

The RAQC and its partners hope to repair up to 250 vehicles to reduce summer ozone formation. To date, nearly 70 vehicles have been repaired as part of Repair Your Air. Plans are underway to expand the program next year.

For more information on the Repair Your Air Campaign, contact Steve McCannon at (303) 629-5450, ext. 230. ■