

Madison Environmental Justice Organization

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Bad Air in Dane County: Where's the Communication?

(MADISON, Wis.) — From February 2-5, Dane County, along with several other counties in Wisconsin, was under an "Air Quality Advisory for Particle Pollution" due to elevated levels of small particulates in the air. The DNR website states that "These fine particles come primarily from combustion sources, such as power plants, factories and other industrial sources, vehicle exhaust, and wood burning" (see <http://dnr.wi.gov/air/aq/health/status.asp>).

The advisory was in the "orange" level, which means that the particulate levels were unhealthy for "sensitive groups"-- people with respiratory and/or heart diseases, the elderly, and children. This includes at least half of the population. Some minority and lower income groups have higher rates of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and/or less access to health care, and are therefore even more vulnerable. The DNR website suggests that "people in those groups are advised to reschedule or cut back on strenuous activities" and more specifically, "people with lung diseases such as asthma and bronchitis, and heart disease should pay attention to cardiac symptoms like chest pain and shortness of breath or respiratory symptoms like coughing, wheezing and discomfort when taking a breath, and consult with their physician if they have concerns or are experiencing symptoms. Fine particle pollution deposits itself deep into the lungs and cannot easily be exhaled. People who are at risk are particularly vulnerable after several days of high particle pollution exposure" (taken verbatim from the website).

As of the morning of Feb. 5, fine particulate level readings at the Madison East High monitors had been high for several days--and in fact, they have been elevated since late January. Despite the common assumption that Madison has pretty good air quality compared to other urban areas, peak particulate levels at the Madison monitors have been higher than nearly all other urban monitors in the state--including Milwaukee--on many days in the last couple of weeks and in the last couple of years.

The following statement, from Dr. Maria Powell, MEJO Executive Director, is in response to this situation:

“Current scientific research on particulates suggests that these levels of particulates are unhealthy for *everyone*, not just ‘sensitive groups.’ Numerous scientific studies have shown that asthma attacks, heart attacks, other respiratory and cardiovascular problems, and even deaths, are associated with increasing

particulate levels and that these effects can occur at levels much lower than those at which advisories are called. New studies suggest that air pollution may cause neurological, reproductive and developmental problems.

“It is critical that we do something to reduce this pollution in Dane County. While this is a regional air quality problem, and is exacerbated by weather patterns such as winter inversions and ‘stagnant air masses’, that doesn't leave Madison and Dane County institutions and people off the hook. It's our pollution that's being trapped by inversions. A purportedly ‘progressive’ community such as Madison, with a high concentration of very educated and privileged people, a prestigious research university and local and state government agencies, has no good excuse for not doing better.

“Moreover, regardless of where the pollution is coming from, the relative lack of communication with the public about this important health issue is disturbing. The Wisconsin DNR does an excellent job monitoring air quality and making this data publicly available, their website is clear and comprehensive, and the air advisory alerts go out to anyone who signs up for them. I commend the DNR for that. However, few people--and particularly those most vulnerable, such as children, elderly, sick, minorities, and lower income people--are likely to get these alerts or to have the resources to meaningfully interpret them. Many don't have email, and materials are not translated for those who don't speak English. Even more troubling, local media have done little to cover air pollution issues and air advisories specifically, and when they do, at most they'll post a very small piece buried deep in the local section that few people are likely to notice. We didn't see any information about air advisories in the Wisconsin State Journal from Feb. 2-5. The Cap Times website finally posted a very small notice of the air advisory on Friday.

“If people do not know to ‘cut back on strenuous activities’ or to ‘pay attention to cardiac symptoms’ during these air advisories--they are not likely to do so and will therefore be more at risk. MEJO leaders have talked with public school teachers, dance school teachers, daycare providers, preschool staff, parents of children with asthma, and numerous others about whether they have heard about advisories this week or in the last few years. None of them have. Parents of children with asthma need to know when their children go off to school on an air advisory day. Kids with asthma need to know not to exert themselves too much on bad air days and to make sure they have their inhalers at hand. Older adults, people with respiratory and cardiovascular problems, and people who care for them, need to know about these advisories so they can help them avoid strenuous activities, etc. Yet it seems that schools, daycares, nursing homes, and other places where people more at risk might be are not getting this information.

“Whose job is it to get information about unsafe levels of air pollution to the people at risk--in ways that actually reach them--e.g., beyond just websites and email alerts? Why aren't government agencies and public health institutions doing more to reach the most vulnerable people with this information--and the wider public?

“Amber Alerts. Snow emergencies. Tornado warnings. Etc. It's clear that information that is deemed important can be widely shared so that everyone knows about. It's a no-brainer that air pollution is important and that people should be warned; so who's got any brains?”

“We have the expertise and resources in this community to do so much better than just emails for those privileged few who know about the DNR service. City and county public health agency websites could post air advisory information. Public health departments could issue press releases to newspapers, television and radio outlets, as well as to schools, daycares, elderly care centers, and other places where vulnerable people live and play. More importantly, agencies, university and public health experts could help these institutions develop air pollution action plans to help asthmatic and other vulnerable children reduce their risks on bad air days. Agencies could work with local groups to sponsor community meetings for people to discuss and get more information about these issues. Newspapers and TV weather reports could include an air pollution index, as is done in many metropolitan areas.”

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