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Bellingham air quality receives mixed ratings in new national report because of wildfire smoke impacts

Report's data does not include 2018's more severe wildfire impacts

Wildfire smoke has worsened local air quality and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, according to the [American Lung Association's](#) 20th annual "[State of the Air](#)" report covering the years 2015-17.

Bellingham was one of only six cities in the nation on the cleanest cities lists for ozone and was among the 11 cities with the lowest year-round particle levels, according to an ALA news release.

But, in an unwelcome change from previous years, overall Whatcom County air quality received only a "C" grade for 24-hour particle pollution because wildfire smoke caused spikes in fine particle data.

The report is a nationwide look at particle and ozone pollution – two widespread air pollutants that are dangerous to public health.

The report uses data from official air quality monitors submitted by air quality agencies and estimates respiratory disease rates to provide a comparative picture of risks to people's health. The report only uses data from specific kinds of monitors and therefore does not include NWCAA data from Island County and other area cities. NWCAA data shows similar air quality trends in those areas.

The data used for the report is from the 2015-2017 period, so it does not include 2018 – when wildfire smoke impacted regional air quality even more.

Among the report's conclusions:

- Skagit County received an overall "A" grade for particle pollution.
- Whatcom and Skagit counties again made the list of cleanest counties for ozone pollution.

"While this is mostly good news for now, we expect results will decline when 2018 smoke impacts are factored into next year's report. And all signs point to wildfire impacts continuing into the future, so we are going to be facing ongoing air quality issues," said Mark Buford, executive director of the [Northwest Clean Air Agency](#).

"Despite the hard work people and businesses in our area do to improve and protect air quality, work remains to be done due to the negative impacts of wildfire smoke," he said.

He noted that means “collaborating with forest management agencies as they work to reduce wildfire risks, coordinating with local health departments in communicating air quality risks during wildfire events, and continuing to limit the threats to air quality that we can control.”

“In Northwest Washington, clean air is a key part of our quality of life. For over 50 years, it has been our privilege and our responsibility to protect that clean air. We will face this air quality challenge using science and all the tools at our disposal,” Buford said.

The report does have some limitations and does not show all the information NWCAA collects. ALA looked at two pollutants that are prevalent and problematic across the country: ozone and particulate. NWCAA monitors for particulate, ozone, sulfur dioxide, and carbon monoxide, depending on the potential sources of air pollution nearby.

If you want to take a closer look at your local air quality, NWCAA has seven air quality monitoring locations in Island, Skagit and Whatcom counties. Go to the [Air Quality Center](#) on our website, www.nwcleanairwa.gov, to see real-time air quality gauges and data trends.

The Northwest Clean Air Agency is responsible for enforcing federal, state and local air quality regulations in Island, Skagit, and Whatcom counties. In addition to permitting and regulating industrial sources of air pollution, the agency provides services and information related to asbestos, indoor air quality, outdoor burning, wood stoves, and fireplaces. More information about the agency is available at www.nwcleanairwa.gov.