



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 21, 2021

Media contact

[Seth Preston](#)

Mobile: 360-724-8766

Newly released national report highlights how wildfire smoke causes short-term impacts to local air quality

The annual "State of the Air" report has some good news, too

Wildfire smoke caused spikes in harmful fine particles that impacted local air quality during the summers of 2017 and 2018, according to the [American Lung Association's](#) 22nd annual ["State of the Air" report](#).

Whatcom County air quality received an "F" grade for 24-hour particle pollution because of smoke impacts. Skagit County received a "D" grade. The report includes data from the years 2017-2019.

The American Lung Association provides two different grades for particulate (smoke) pollution. The 24-hour grade is based on the smokiest days; the annual grade is based on how much smoke is in the air as a yearly average.

"As you recall from the wildfire smoke we experienced in 2017, and 2018, there were some very smoky days. As a result, all of the counties in Washington, including ours, score poorly on the daily averages," said Mark Buford, [Northwest Clean Air Agency](#) executive director. "The silver lining is that even with those bad days of wildfire smoke, we score well on an annual average. These low grades really are an issue of periodic wildfire smoke."

Buford emphasized that residents of Island, Skagit, and Whatcom counties generally enjoy good air quality.

For example, Bellingham tied for seventh place among the cleanest U.S. cities for year-round particle pollution. Both Whatcom and Skagit counties received passing grades for year-round particle pollution.

"Local air quality would have been in the 'A' range for the 24-hour grades if, using the Lung Association's methodology, we factored the wildfire smoke out of our data," Buford said.

"But those are numbers and data. The reality is local residents were affected by wildfire smoke that heavily impacted air quality on a number of days in both 2017 and 2018."

The "State of the Air" report takes 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, so it does not include NWCAA data for Island County and other area cities. NWCAA data shows similar air quality trends in those areas.

Among the report's conclusions:

- Skagit County received an overall "A" grade for ozone pollution, ranking it among the cleanest U.S. counties for ozone pollution.
- Whatcom County received a "B" for ozone pollution, likely because wildfire smoke contributed to two days of higher-than-usual ozone readings in 2018.

"We appreciate how people and businesses in our area work hard to improve and protect air quality, but there's always more to do," Buford said. "So it's crucial for NWCAA to continue efforts to limit the threats to air quality that the agency can control, like industrial emissions and illegal burning.

"And as we enter another wildfire season with already-dry conditions, it's important for everyone to do whatever they can to limit the potential of igniting a wildfire," he noted.

He said NWCAA works with local health officials, fire marshals, fire districts, and forest management agencies as they try to reduce wildfire risk and help people cope with the impacts of wildfire events.

NWCAA has eight air quality monitoring locations in Island, Skagit, and Whatcom counties. Go to the [Air Quality Center](#) on our website, <https://nwcleanairwa.gov>, for information.

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, woodstoves, and fireplaces. More information about the agency is available at <https://nwcleanairwa.gov>.