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New national report spotlights the short-term damage that wildfire smoke causes to local air quality

Good news: Ozone levels, overall air quality remain in healthy ranges

Spikes in harmful fine particles in wildfire smoke impacted local air quality during the summers of 2018 and 2020, the [American Lung Association](#)'s 23rd annual "State of the Air" report concludes.

As expected, Whatcom County air quality received an "F" grade for 24-hour particle pollution because of wildfire smoke impacts. Skagit County received a "D" grade. The report includes data from the years 2018-2020.

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.

"Our area experienced large, prolonged wildfire smoke events in 2018 and 2020. That caused all of Washington's counties, including Whatcom and Skagit counties, to score poorly on the daily averages," said Mark Buford, [Northwest Clean Air Agency](#) executive director.

"But it's very important to note that even with those bad days of wildfire smoke, we score well on an annual average. These low grades really are because of these harmful wildfire smoke events."

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

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

"But setting aside such data calculations, the reality for local residents is that wildfire smoke had heavy impacts on air quality on a number of days in both 2018 and 2020."

The "State of the Air" report takes a nationwide look at particle and ozone pollution – two common, 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.

“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,” Buford said.

He pointed out that 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.

Buford also said it’s vital for NWCAA to continue working to protect and improve air quality in areas the agency can regulate, like industrial emissions and illegal burning. “We appreciate the people and businesses in our area who do work hard to improve and protect air quality, but there’s always more that can be done.”

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. NWCAA also provides a variety of resources – tips, videos, fact sheets, and more – about how to prepare and deal with wildfire smoke on the website’s [Wildfire Smoke Information](#) page.

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>.