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Media contact

[Seth Preston](#)

Mobile: 360-724-8766

Wildfire smoke continues to take a toll on short-term local air quality, according to just-released national report

Ozone levels, overall air quality remain in healthy ranges

High levels of wildfire smoke full of harmful fine particles impacted local air quality during the summers of 2020 and 2021, according to the [American Lung Association](#)'s 24th annual national "State of the Air" report.

Almost every county in Washington polled for this report received an "F" grade for 24-hour particle pollution because of wildfire smoke. The report includes data from the years 2019-2021.

Skagit County received an "A" grade, but that resulted from data collection issues. [Northwest Clean Air Agency](#)'s data shows Skagit County also experienced high levels of wildfire smoke in the summers of 2020 and 2021.

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 managed to avoid wildfire smoke events in 2019, but experienced large, prolonged events in 2020 and 2021. This caused all of Washington's counties, including Whatcom, to score poorly on the daily averages," said Mark Buford, [Northwest Clean Air Agency](#) executive director.

Buford emphasized that people living and working in Island, Skagit, and Whatcom counties generally enjoy good air quality.

"It's important to keep in mind that we score well for year-round air quality, even with those bad days of wildfire smoke factored in. Low 24-hour grades tie directly to those harmful wildfire smoke events.

"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 said.

"Still, the reality is local residents faced heavy impacts because wildfire smoke degraded air quality on a number of days in both 2020 and 2021."

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 some area cities. NWCAA data shows similar air quality trends in those areas.

Among the report's conclusions:

- Skagit and Whatcom counties received overall "A" grades for ozone pollution, ranking them among the cleanest U.S. counties for ozone.
- Whatcom County received a "pass" – the highest grade given – for annual particle pollution. Skagit County received an "incomplete" because of the data collection issue mentioned earlier.

"We're heading into this year's wildfire season with potential drought conditions, so it's important for everyone to do whatever they can to limit the possibility of sparking a wildfire," Buford 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 wildfire smoke.

Buford said NWCAA continues working to protect and improve air quality through regulating pollution from industrial emissions, illegal burning, and other sources. "We appreciate all the people and businesses who work hard to improve and protect air quality in our area. And in wildfire season we need to make an extra effort."

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>.