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The Lung Association's Latest Bogus Air Quality Report on Allegheny County

Right on schedule, the American Lung Association is out with its annual report on air pollution in the EPA's Pittsburgh attainment region that includes several counties in Southwest Pennsylvania, two in West Virginia and one in Ohio. As usual it portrays the region as one of the worst in the country, ranking 9th worst among metro areas for particulate matter and 10th in ozone. Based on the Lung Association report, Allegheny County was targeted for particularly strident criticism for having unsafe air in a press release from the Clean Air Council and PennFuture. However, there are many problems with the methodology used in the report, and more importantly, it fails to point out just how clean the air in the region actually is, especially in Allegheny County.

In the first place, the Association report uses data averaged over the three year period 2011, 2012, and 2013 according to EPA standard guidelines. Therefore the oldest data is now four years old and the newest is from almost 18 months ago. Air quality in the County has improved significantly since 2011. For fine particulate matter (PM2.5—the subject of most of the press release's criticism) the average concentration level measured at the 11 monitors (at nine locations) throughout Allegheny County and reported to the EPA fell 13 percent from 2011 to 2013. Indeed, in 2013 not one of the 11 monitors had an annual average level of PM2.5 above the EPA's standard of 12 micrograms per cubic meter (*all data taken from EPA website*). Not only did the average for the monitoring sites in the County fall from 2011 to 2013, each and every monitoring location for which EPA keeps records including Avalon, Oakdale, Lawrenceville, Liberty, McCandless, Harrison, North Braddock, and Clairton reported lower PM2.5 levels in 2013 than in 2011—the Avalon reading was down 25 percent.

As noted above, the EPA standard for attainment is based on an average of three annual sets of readings of the concentration levels for PM2.5. Based on the three year criterion, only the two monitoring stations in Liberty Borough near the coke plant violated the EPA standard. Monitor one at Liberty averaged 13.4 micrograms per cubic meter, while monitor two averaged 12.9. All other monitors in the County averaged below 12 for the three years 2011, 2012, and 2013, ranging from 8.8 in McCandless to 11.7 in North Braddock. In the City, the two monitoring stations in Lawrenceville averaged 10.3 and 9.9, both in what is classified as the green or good range.

So, in order to classify the entire County as having bad air in its 2015 report, the Lung Association has to rely on the Liberty monitor readings of 2011 and 2012 because they caused those monitors to be above the three year average standard—note that the Liberty monitors

averaged under 12 in 2013. But since all other monitors in the County were in three year compliance with readings in the good range (under 12) for the three year period, the Lung Association's pillorying of County air quality is completely irrational. Did they even consider reviewing data from other monitoring sites? If 95 percent or more of the County's area has good air, what useful purpose is served by trying to make people in good air areas believe they are in danger from the one small area? This is especially true considering the one small area has moved in to the good range in recent years.

Moreover, if the Lung Association is serious about their methodology and their research, before they put out a report that talks about air quality as if it had not changed in four years, they might want to look at some recent data. The County Health Department maintains six PM2.5 monitoring facilities at four daily reporting sites in Allegheny County, Liberty and Lincoln in the Mon Valley, as well as in Lawrenceville and Avalon. The data from these six monitors are reported daily on the Health Department website. Since April 23 of this year there has been only one 24 hour average reading of PM2.5 above 12 at any monitor in the County and that occurred at the Lincoln monitor on April 29 when a measurement of 13 was recorded. The above 12 reading at Lincoln was preceded by several days in the 6 to 9 range and was quickly replaced by another reading of 9 on the 30th. In other words, this reading was no cause for alarm or even concern except among those who look for any chance, no matter how insignificant in the grand scheme, to issue dire warnings.

In short, as far as particulate matter is concerned in Allegheny County, 2015 has improved over the 2013 readings, which was itself significantly improved from 2011. And bear in mind that from the standard set by the EPA, the entire County has been deemed to have unhealthy air by virtue of nothing more than the Liberty readings of 2011 and 2012.

This latest Lung Association report qualifies as junk science since it goes on at length to make it sound as if people living in any part of Allegheny County are at very high risk of lung diseases and severe aggravation of other diseases. When will the air ever be clean enough for them ? And when will they stop using flawed analysis to push an agenda?

Here's a final question. With his strong environmentalist views, is the City's Mayor worried about air quality in Pittsburgh? Apparently not. If air quality was as bad as the Lung Association and the Clean Air Council claim it is, then it would be imprudent and ill-advised for the Mayor to allow the marathon to be held in the City and certainly he should not be encouraging large numbers of people to ride bicycles on all the miles of bike paths he is creating. Imagine the lung and other respiratory damage to those people if the City's air quality actually matched the level claimed in rhetoric spewed out by the groups who never stop complaining about air pollution.

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