

POLICY BRIEF

An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

May 5, 2008

Volume 8, Number 28

Lung Association Needs to Use More Brainpower

This is the type of headline that media outlets love: “Pittsburgh has the worst air in the country”. Print, radio and TV news outlets have been running this headline since the American Lung Association’s *State of the Air* report showed Pittsburgh moving ahead of Los Angeles in terms of sooty air to rank as the worst region in the nation. The same headlines were major stories in media markets all over the country, resulting in an unwarranted and indefensible trashing of Pittsburgh’s image. While some local Pittsburgh reporters dug a little deeper to find the true facts about the air quality ranking, news media across the nation simply repeated ad nauseam the Lung Association’s flawed and grossly misleading findings.

The salient fact is the Lung Association’s Pittsburgh metro area ranking is based on only one of sixteen air monitors in the Pittsburgh region —the Liberty Borough monitor that sits in a valley near the nation’s largest coke plant and the only monitor in the region to show readings above the national standard. Yet the Pm2.5 (small particles) readings at this one particulate monitoring station are being used by the American Lung Association to sully the reputation of an entire region. But the ALA is apparently not about to let faulty methodology get in the way of promoting their agenda.

The Lung Association’s Pittsburgh air quality ranking applies to a region that is home to over 2.4 million people. But as the Allegheny County Health Department notes, there are only 25,000 people living near the one monitoring station with Pm2.5 readings above the national standard. Unfortunately, the national headlines generated by the Lung Association imply all 2.4 million people are breathing air that puts their health at great risk.

This methodology would be equivalent to saying that because the Duquesne School district has some of the lowest test scores in the state that all public schools in western Pennsylvania are performing poorly. Obviously, that is not true as indicated by the fact that five of the state’s very best school districts are in Allegheny County. It would be like saying that because a certain neighborhood in a city has a high crime rate, that the entire region around that city is a high crime zone. In short, smearing an entire region with bad numbers from one small corner of that region is nothing less than methodological malpractice.

Several other facts undermine the usefulness of the Lung Association rankings. First is the time frame used. The ALA measurement is based on a three year moving average, in this case from 2004 to 2006. The more recent 2007 numbers are not even mentioned. What makes this so interesting is that the highest readings from the meters around Allegheny County were recorded in 2005. Weather records indicate that 2005 was an exceptionally warm year in Pennsylvania. Is there is a high correlation with temperature and air particulates? The ALA didn't make the connection or offer it as an explanation. In 2006, and even in 2007, when temperatures were cooler, all readings were lower, even at the Liberty Borough monitor.

The second problem with the "Pittsburgh has terrible air" story is neither Allegheny nor any of the surrounding counties made the ALA's top twenty-five list for high ozone levels. None of the major media reports point out this very important fact because the Lung Association did not emphasize it.

On a regional average basis, Pittsburgh air is as good as if not better than other Pennsylvania metro areas that did not make the Lung Association top ten worst air list. It would be laughable for the Lung Association to rank Pittsburgh as having the worst air in the country based on its flimsy evidence if it did not serve to reinforce negative stereotypes around the country where folks do not get the full story.

But what is truly disheartening is that the Governor has sat by quietly and let this nonsense masquerading as scientific analysis do harm to the Pittsburgh region's image go unchallenged.

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