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Region's Air Doesn't Meet New Standards

By ANTHONY DEPALMA

Most of the people who live in New York State and all the residents of New Jersey and Connecticut are breathing air that does not meet new federal health standards for smog, according to a report released yesterday by federal environmental officials. The pollution is a combination of dirty emissions produced in the states themselves and contaminants that float in on air coming from the Midwest and central Canada.

As a result, state and county officials across the three states must now prepare plans for reducing the most serious air pollutant, ground-level ozone, which is produced by cars, power plants and factories, and which causes respiratory problems and makes asthma worse.

Officials say they are considering toughening automobile emissions inspections and increasing the use of specially formulated gasoline during the summer, when the ozone problem is most severe. Failure to meet the new, stricter standards could have economic consequences, including the loss of federal highway money or the inability to get approval for new manufacturing and other business developments.

Officials of all three states have long made federal officials aware of their concern about pollution drifting in from the Midwest, and yesterday Gov. James E. McGreevey of New Jersey placed blame for the situation with the Bush administration.

"The Bush administration's lack of leadership and its failure to stop polluters, especially in the Midwest, continues to damage New Jersey's air quality," Mr. McGreevey, a Democrat, said in a statement.

Gov. George E. Pataki of New York did not directly criticize the Bush administration but called on Washington to get tough with Midwest polluters. "Our ultimate goal must be to enact measures across the nation that will make certain Midwestern sources of pollution are reduced," Mr. Pataki, a Republican, said in a statement.

In all, the federal Environmental Protection Agency notified 31 governors yesterday that their states had failed to meet the new ozone standards. New Jersey and Connecticut were among five states, all on the East Coast, in which every county was considered to be plagued by unacceptable levels of pollution. The others are Delaware, Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

The New York counties where smog levels exceed federal standards are on Long Island, in New York City, in the suburbs north and northwest of the city, and the western part of the state. They have 16 million residents, most of the state's population.

Jane M. Kenny, the E.P.A.'s regional administrator for New York and New Jersey, said the new list did not mean that the region's air had become dirtier. Rather, she said, the new standards are part of a broader, more aggressive effort to keep the air clean. The new standards, and regulations to help attain them, not only will clean up the region's air, she said, but will help reduce asthma and other respiratory problems.

She added that new regulations released this week by the E.P.A. would reduce power plant emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides that drift across state lines and end up contaminating air on the East Coast.

The new standard for measuring smog requires air samples to be taken over eight hours, replacing standards that used a one-hour sample.

Standards for ozone and soot were tightened in 1997 during the Clinton administration but did not take effect for several years because of legal challenges that rose as high as the Supreme Court, which rejected the arguments in 2001.

It has taken the E.P.A. three years to compile the list of counties in violation of the new standards. During that time, New York and other states lobbied heavily to keep certain counties off the list. Because of an anomaly in testing, officials said, the city of Syracuse and the counties around it, have been left unclassified until more samples can be taken during the ozone season this summer.

The E.P.A.'s final list contains 474 counties, which have a total population of 159 million people. Local and state governments have until April 2007 to come up with plans to reduce the two main components of ozone, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds. They will then have up to seven years to implement the plans.

David McIntosh, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, said that no matter what New York, New Jersey and Connecticut do, it may not be enough unless federal officials get tougher with industries west of the coast. "The E.P.A. has to require the large air pollution sources in and upwind of New York State to install pollution control technology that American know-how has already made available," he said, "and to do it now, not 20 years from now."