



## Director's Corner

### New air quality standard means better protection

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has adopted a new air quality standard to improve protection of public health when forecasting air quality this summer. Air quality continues to improve in Virginia, but the standard by which good air quality is measured has changed.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued the standard, which lowers the amount of ozone in the air that is considered unhealthy for people susceptible to breathing difficulties. The change was based on health studies indicating that ozone can cause health problems at lower concentrations than previously known. The new ozone level is 76 parts per billion and above, which is stricter than the old level of 85 parts per billion, during an eight-hour period.

For the public, this means that there may be more Air Quality Action days from April to September. Everyone benefits from the lower ozone concentrations, but sensitive groups, such as people with asthma, may see the most benefit.

Air Quality Action days, as well as air quality forecasts, are announced by DEQ via email and tell the public when to adjust daily activities based on increased air pollution. On Air Quality Action days, people are encouraged to take extra steps to protect themselves and help reduce pollution.

Code Orange alerts indicate when sensitive groups may experience health problems. Code Red alerts mean the general public may experience health effects, and sensitive groups may have more serious effects. These codes are based on the national Air Quality Index, which is a measurement of air quality that is calculated from ozone and fine particle pollution levels and is color-coded by level of health concern.

Some localities already have had days in 2008 that have exceeded the new ozone standard this year, but it is important to remember that air quality is not getting worse; Virginia now has a tougher standard to meet.

DEQ already is reviewing air quality information for Virginia and will make a recommendation to EPA on what areas may not meet the standard. In 2010, EPA will make the final decision on this and set the deadlines for meeting the new standard. Then Virginia will have several years to develop strategies that will help localities meet the deadlines.



DEQ Director David K. Paylor

We recognize that meeting these new standards may be difficult, especially for Northern Virginia, Richmond and other areas. DEQ will carefully assess air quality information and the options available to reduce ozone, and develop a program that leads to ongoing improvements in the air we breathe.

Air quality forecasts are available on the DEQ [website](#) or by [online subscription](#). Air quality forecasts also are updated each weekday afternoon by 5 p.m. at (804) 698-4444 or toll-free in Virginia at (800) 592-5482, ext. 4444.

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