

Lives Lost in the Soot



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New Yorkers live in the streets, so why are we measuring air pollution on the rooftops?

Take a deep breath. Usually, this simple act helps us calm down and restore our sense of well-being. But if you live or work in the New York Metropolitan Area, that deep breath could be harming your health. Walking to your local store, playing frisbee in the park, riding the bus to school, driving on the highway—all these activities expose you to dangerous air pollution. Due to a lapse in government oversight, this local, street-level pollution is not measured or evaluated by the agencies that are supposed to be protecting our health and the environment. And, due to recent inaction by the state and City, we shouldn't expect improvements anytime soon.

For years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has fought to weaken health-protective air pollution standards and has resisted enforcing those standards. Thanks to environmental group lawsuits, the EPA recently tightened its health standard for fine soot particle pollution (PM2.5). The EPA told New York and many other regions that they would need to develop new plans to monitor and clean up this pollution to protect public health.

PM2.5 is one nasty pollutant. These particles can lodge deep in the lungs. Public health research has shown that exposure to these particles can lower children's IQ scores,

exacerbate asthma attacks, damage developing lungs, contribute to heart attacks, affect some types of cancer, increase premature

birth rates and even result in death. This month, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation released a draft State Implementation Plan (SIP) to reduce regional PM2.5 levels to meet the federal health-based standard by 2010. Sounds good, right? The problem is that this plan intentionally ignores some of the biggest fine soot pollution problems that harm New Yorkers. New York State should be looking to identify soot polluters and find solutions that truly will protect public health. The plan puts you and your family's health in continuing peril.

The SIP looks at pollution away from sources such as diesel buses and trucks, cars, or power plants. Official air monitors are on rooftops or sometimes miles away from local 'hot spots' of pollution like major highways,

bus depots or shipping warehouses. Any plan using these monitors might protect pigeons, but it sure won't represent what the typical New Yorker breathes.

Soot pollution emitted in places like the urban street canyons of midtown Manhattan would expose people to higher levels of pollution than the same amount of emissions further away from tall buildings and major population centers. In fact, a study by the Harvard School of Public Health shows that these street canyons are among the worst places to emit pollution, with much higher exposures for every pollution source than previously found in other studies. A Los Angeles study found that if researchers more accurately estimate exposures, based on localized rather than ambient air pollution levels, risk estimates of death from heart attacks triple. We need street-level and near-highway air monitoring to truly measure our exposures so we can make better decisions to protect health.

We have an urban air quality crisis. Even the flawed SIP recognizes that "PM2.5 levels are generally higher in the core urban areas compared to the surrounding suburban coun-

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ties.” The EPA and New York State environmental officials need to account for the deliberate blind spots in area pollution monitoring and revise the SIP to protect the health of all the region's residents. In Los Angeles, environmental groups have sued the EPA to challenge approval of a PM2.5 SIP with deficiencies similar to those in New York's plan. Write to Diana Rivenburgh (NYS DEC, Division of Air Resources, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-3251) and demand an end to this distortion before more lives are lost to soot. Our next deep breath should calm, not hurt us. □

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