

# Real Change or Paper Change? How Health and Environmental Groups Will Evaluate EPA's Proposals



When the U.S. EPA proposes revisions to the national air quality standards for particulate matter (PM) air pollution, it will require more than just a quick look to evaluate. The bottom line is that any standard must meet the test set in the Clean Air Act:

## **Does the standard protect public health with an adequate margin of safety?**

A unanimous Supreme Court decision in 2001 emphasized that *protection of health*—not potential cost to clean up—is the only legal basis for setting the national air quality standards. Costs will be considered later in developing the plans for cleaning up to meet the standards.

The American Lung Association and other public health and environmental organizations will be evaluating EPA's proposed standards to see they meet the Clean Air Act requirement based on the responses to these questions:

### **For the fine particle standard (PM<sub>2.5</sub>)**

1. **How does the proposed standard compare to the one EPA's own analysis showed that prevented the most deaths from particle pollution—a clear measure of protecting public health?**

- EPA's own risk analysis for 9 US cities showed that **the tightest option evaluated reduced premature death from particle pollution by 86 percent**. That option was setting the **annual average at 12  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  and the 24-hour at 25  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  measured at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile**.
- This is the option recommended by over one hundred leading environmental scientists, the American Lung Association, American Thoracic Society, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Cardiology, American Public Health Association, American College of Preventative Medicine and other public health organizations. This option is also supported by Environmental Defense, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Clean Air Watch, and the US Public Interest Research Group.

#### Questions to ask:

- Why would EPA choose a standard that does not provide the most protection for public health?
- What explanation do they have for selecting an option that would not prevent the maximum number of deaths each year?

2. **How does the proposal compare to what EPA's independent scientific advisory panel recommended?**

The Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) reviewed EPA's technical documents and made specific policy recommendations. They recommended *lowering both the annual and the 24-hour standards significantly*. They recommended:

- lowering the annual standard from 15  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  to 13-14  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$
- lowering the 24-hour standard from 65  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  to 30-35  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$

#### Questions to ask:

- Has EPA proposed to lower both the annual and 24-hour standard as CASAC (and 100 other scientists) recommended?

- Is EPA’s proposal above the range CASAC recommended?
- If is above that range, why has EPA chosen to ignore their scientific advice?

**3. How does the proposal compare with what EPA’s own staff scientists recommended?**

EPA’s own staff scientists recommended two options:

- Option A: Keep the annual standard at 15  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  and lower the 24-hour standard to 25-30  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  if measured at 98th percentile or 30-35  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  if measured at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile.
- Option B: Annual standard of 12-14  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  together with a 24-hour standard of 30 to 40  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$

Questions to ask:

- Are the proposed standards above the levels recommended by EPA staff scientists?
- Has EPA proposed to reduce the number of high pollution days that will be permitted?
- Has EPA proposed to eliminate or restrict monitor averaging as recommended by staff scientists?

**For the coarse particle standard (PM<sub>10-2.5</sub>)**

1. Does the coarse particle standard provide equal protection to all areas of the country, urban and rural?
2. Is the standard set at a level that will protect public health? Is it more or less protective than the existing standard for PM<sub>10</sub> set in 1987?

**For the secondary standard**

EPA staff scientists and CASAC also recommended lowering the “secondary” standard, designed to protect public welfare and the environment. Environmental groups will be evaluating the answers to these questions:

Questions to ask:

1. Has EPA proposed a secondary standard to protect against visibility impairment in urban areas?
2. Is the standard at the lower end of the range recommended by EPA staff scientists and endorsed by CASAC (20  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ )?
3. Is the form of the standard appropriate to prevent hazy days (four hour rolling average during daylight hours)?
4. How many days of pollution haze will be permitted under the proposed standard before a violation is recorded?

**Note: For more details about the five key aspects of the standard that affect its ability to protect public health, see the *Backgrounder: It’s More Than Just a Number—Five Key Parts to the Standard.***