

Backgrounder: The Air Quality Standard Setting Process



Under the Clean Air Act, EPA has to do three things:

- Figure out how much air pollution is unhealthy for people to breathe—*The air quality standard-setting process*
- Work with states to determine which of their counties contain or generate too much air pollution—*The nonattainment designation process*
- Be sure the states have a workable plan that will clean up the excess pollution in those areas—*The state implementation planning process*

The Standard Setting Process

What is a “National Ambient Air Quality Standard”?

- *The National Ambient Air Quality Standard is an officially determined limit of a specific outdoor air pollutant.* The standard is set as an explicit concentration of the pollutant measured over a specified time. These standards only apply to outdoor, or ambient, air.
- The Clean Air Act requires EPA to set this official limit where the level protects public health, including the health of susceptible populations, with an “adequate margin of safety.”
- The Act also requires that the standards be based strictly on the health effects of the pollutants. The costs and technical feasibility of cleaning up this pollution are addressed during the implementation planning process for reaching the standards.

The last time EPA set a standard for particulate air pollution was 1997.

Why does the standard matter? *The standard is the goal for clean air for every county in the nation.* To protect public health from the widespread harm from air pollution, states must reduce air pollution to levels that meet the standard.

How is the standard set? The Clean Air Act requires that EPA review the standards every five years to be sure the standards reflect the latest scientific and medical knowledge. The process has four basic steps:

1. EPA brings together and examines the recent research about the pollutant. This compilation and interpretation of the evidence is called a “Criteria Document.” It is reviewed by an outside peer review committee, the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, or CASAC, which includes a broad range of scientists, including some from industry as well as academic researchers.
2. EPA staff scientists interpret the new science, prepare a risk assessment, evaluate the policy options, and recommend a range of concentrations to the Administrator for a new standard. The scientists put together their analyses and recommendations in a “Staff Paper.”
3. The Administrator reviews the Staff Paper and announces his recommendation for a proposed new standard in the Federal Register. That proposed new standard is then open for public comment.
4. The Administrator announces the official new standard in the Federal Register, triggering the beginning steps toward obtaining the emissions reductions needed to protect public health from the dangers of air pollution.

Step 1 for particulate air pollution was finished October 30, 2004.

Step 2 was finished June 30, 2005.

Step 3 must be finished December 20, 2005.

Step 4 must be finished September 27, 2006.