

<https://www.denverpost.com/2019/12/16/colorado-air-quality-pollution-standards/>

December 17, 2019 at 1:08 pm

News

Environment

EPA declares Colorado a “serious” violator of federal air quality standards, forcing stricter efforts to reduce pollution

The Associated Press file

A smoky haze envelopes the skyscrapers and Rocky Mountains that usually can be seen as a backdrop to the city from a high-rise building in Denver on Monday, Aug. 20, 2018.

By Bruce Finley | bfinley@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: December 16, 2019 at 4:05 pm | UPDATED: December 17, 2019 at 9:01 am

The Environmental Protection Agency on Monday reclassified Colorado as a “serious” violator of federal air quality laws, forcing stricter state efforts to reduce air pollution.

“EPA is taking this action based on monitoring data showing that ozone remains a challenge in Denver and northern Front Range communities,” the agency’s regional administrator Greg Sopkin said in a prepared statement announcing the decision.

This triggers a requirement that Colorado must reduce pollution by 2021, and the state health department plans to issue permits for any industrial operation that emits more than 50 tons of pollution a year, down from the current permitting threshold of 100 tons.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment air pollution control officials are planning to issue about 600 more permits, which set limits and give a basis for compliance inspections. The officials within a year must submit a plan to the EPA for reducing ozone levels to meet health standards.

Ozone contributes to a degradation of air quality along the Front Range that has led to respiratory problems, such as asthma, which occurs in Denver at higher rates than in other U.S. cities and above the national norm.

“The department is on it,” agency director Jill Hunsaker Ryan said in a statement. “We already adopted a zero-emission vehicle rule this year. We are pursuing additional resources that will allow us to nearly double our capacity to inspect oil and gas production facilities. And starting tomorrow, the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission will begin its hearing on proposed rules under Senate Bill 181 that will reduce pollution and unnecessary leaks at oil and gas operations.”

EPA officials had been delaying this decision to reclassify Colorado as a “serious” rather than “moderate” violator, holding a public hearing this year even though Gov. Jared Polis indicated in March that the state wouldn’t pursue exemptions from the federal law. Polis declared that Colorado wouldn’t seek a “blame it on China” waiver that former Gov. John Hickenlooper pursued based on waiving international pollution. Polis instead has ordered action to clean up bad air.

State air quality commissioners this week are expected to approve tighter regulations for the oil and gas industry, a source of the volatile organic chemicals that contribute to the formation of ozone.

Zero-emission electric vehicles are expected to reduce emissions from more people driving. Earlier this year, state air commissioners required better technology at breweries and set standards for consumer products and architectural and industrial coatings that can release volatile organic chemicals that boost ozone.

Since 2004, Colorado has been flunking federal air quality health standards with ozone air pollution exceeding a decade-old federal limit of 75 parts per billion, let alone the current limit of 70 parts per billion. The World Health Organization recommends no more than 50 parts per billion to protect human health. Europe has set a limit of 60 parts per billion.

Related Articles

EPA mulls whether to downgrade Colorado to a “serious” violator of air quality standards — a move the state favors

Front Range area missed air quality deadline, plans to improve

EPA proposes downgrading Denver and northern Front Range to “serious” violator of air quality standards

Colorado air monitors this year have measured ozone pollution around 79 parts per billion along the Front Range — still exceeding the 75 parts per billion limit.

“The air in beautiful Colorado has been unsafe to breathe for far too long,” Center For Biological Diversity attorney Robert Ukeiley said, urging better control over oil and gas industry operations as an important next step.

“The state is required to attain the 70 parts per billion standard by August 2021,” Ukeiley said. “There’s no reason for the state to take longer than that considering that ozone can kill people and cause other irreversible impacts.”