

Commentary on Health Impacts of Petition Action - Clean Air Act Section 176A Petition

By Dr. Cindy L. Parker

Dr. Parker participated in the announcement of the filing of the federal Clean Air Act Section 176A petition aimed at requiring “upwind” states to take steps to control air pollution generated within their borders that causes public health issues in “downwind states.” After the event, she offered the following thoughts:

As a public health physician charged with protecting the health of the public and specializing in the health impacts of air pollution, energy choices, and climate change, I am pleased that nine additional states may soon have to provide cleaner air for their own citizens and for those who live downwind.

Air pollution, and ozone in particular, damages lung tissue. Children, elders, and anyone with heart or lung disease is especially at risk of suffering additional ill health from exposure to ground-level ozone—that’s a substantial segment of our population. Although the health of residents of the downwind states will benefit from reductions in air pollution in the upwind states, it is important to call attention to the fact that residents of the upwind states—Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia—will benefit from breathing cleaner air in their own states.

There is a LOT of evidence that people who already have lung diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or chronic bronchitis, feel worse when concentrations of ozone increase, making them feel more short of breath, requiring higher doses of medicines, or sending them to emergency rooms. If you have ever watched someone struggling to breathe, you know how much they suffer as they fight to get the life-saving air into their lungs, and then fight again to get the air out to make room for the next breath. If you've watched someone you love do this, a child or a grandparent perhaps, it is heartbreaking.

From a medical standpoint, it is especially heartbreaking to know that much of this suffering is completely preventable by cleaning up the air we breathe. Air pollution also causes people with heart disease to experience more symptoms and increases their risk of having a heart attack and of dying from a heart attack.

Infants breathe twice as much air per pound of weight than adults do. Any pollutants in that air, such as ozone, could cause irreparable lung damage that might reduce lung function for the rest of their lives.

People don't have a choice as to which air they breathe or how much air they breathe. Air pollution is an equal opportunity problem. Wealth, profession, amount of education, religious belief, or quantity of personal possessions do not offer protection from air pollution. Air pollution does not leap over the state where it is produced and begin causing damage to residents of another state.

Citizens of the "upwind" states are breathing polluted air and suffering the health consequences, and they will gain immediate health benefits from breathing cleaner air. Citizens of the downwind states have no control over the air that blows into their state and they are suffering the health consequences

of that polluted air. It is in everyone's best interests, for the health of all of our loved ones and ourselves, to clean up our air.

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