

# Knocking the wind out of N.S. Smog Problem

By Maggy Burns

NOVA SCOTIANS enjoy living in a wonderful part of the world, with stunning coastlines, magnificent wilderness and a strong feeling of community - and the second highest rate of childhood asthma in the country. This juxtaposition is worth getting agitated about.

No matter how much we complain about our less-than-spring-like weather, we have to be glad that we're not in Ontario where recent smog events left residents feeling the health impacts of poor air quality.

Although Nova Scotians often think we have nothing to worry about as we breathe our apparently pristine maritime air, it's not the case. As far back as the 1970s, studies began to show that Nova Scotia is an area of high smog - a word that describes the mix of harmful chemicals in our air. In fact, Atlantic Canada is one of three regions in this country prone to ozone-related smog (along with the Québec-Windsor corridor and southwestern British Columbia).

In 1998, Kejimikujik was ranked the seventh worst location in Canada for particulate matter and ninth worst for ground-level ozone, two of the primary contributors to smog. One of the troubling and counterintuitive facts about smog is that it can sometimes have a greater impact outside urban areas where ozone is not "mopped up" by other atmospheric pollutants.

In Canada, on-road vehicles contribute up to 35 per cent of the emissions involved in smog formation, which is why the Ecology Action Centre works on projects like the Steer Clean vehicle-early retirement program. The remainder of smog-forming emissions are from industrial sources such as coal-fired power plants. Smog in Atlantic Canada has a number of origins; it is both local and imported. Experts think more than 50 per cent of our poor air quality is a result of being the "tailpipe of North America," where prevailing winds push pollution to us from the Ohio Valley, southern Ontario and the northeastern United States.

The frightening thing about air quality problems is that the latest health science research shows there is no safe level for smog. Even small amounts of air pollution can result in health issues such as asthma and respiratory infections. A recent Health Canada report revised the number of deaths per year in Canada that can be attributed to air pollution from 5,000 to 5,900. Smog issues provide an example of the increasingly obvious inter-relationships between what were once thought to be separate environmental concerns. For instance, the link between air pollution and higher global temperatures was made clear by the 12 days of smog alerts during a heat wave in Ontario this month.

It will take concerted and continuous efforts from individuals, government and industry to resolve Canada's smog problems. But take heart, there are signs of hope! Here are some of the latest ones:

All five of Ontario's coal-fired power plants are slated for closure by 2009, and Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty says he's willing to consider legal action to combat air pollution coming from the U.S. Canadian environmental groups took the first step towards a legal challenge if the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does not take action on the emissions from the 250 U.S. coal-fired power plants that contribute to Canada's air quality problems.

New provincial air-quality regulations came into effect this March which will cut sulphur dioxide emissions in Nova Scotia by 25 per cent this year and 50 per cent by 2010, resulting in about 36,000 fewer tonnes of sulphur dioxide entering our air each year.

The proposed HRM Regional Plan emphasizes less urban sprawl through land-use planning and recognizes the important role of more sustainable transportation choices. Metro Transit's upcoming MetroLink bus service is an example of this philosophy in action.

The EAC's new Steer Clean program offers rewards and information to car owners willing to recycle their older (pre-1995), high-polluting vehicles. This incentive-based program is designed to target the 10 to 15 per cent of Nova Scotia's car fleet that is older and contributes a remarkable 50 per cent of the vehicle-related smog-forming emissions.

So, let's turn the issue of smog on its head and make our actions count for something positive: Make a stink about trans-boundary polluters; support the HRM Regional Plan; conserve energy in your home; use your wood stove responsibly and enjoy the fire, not the smoke; choose not to idle your car unnecessarily, in keeping with HRM's current reduced-idling campaign; use a push mower; get out your old bike or walk to the corner store; recycle your old car through Steer Clean. And as you do, think about how vital it is to be able to take a deep breath.

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