

Take a Deep Breath: You Can Make a Difference to Nova Scotia's Smog Problem

By Maggy Burns, Steer Clean Coordinator, EAC



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 rates of childhood asthma in the country. Undoubtedly 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, the 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, NS was ranked the 7th worst location in Canada for particulate matter and 9th 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 are known to contribute up to 35 per cent of the emissions that are 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 that 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. This means that 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 which can be attributed to air pollution from 5,000 to 5,900. Smog issues provide a example of the increasingly obvious inter-relationships between what were once thought to be separate environmental concerns. For example, the link between air pollution and higher global temperatures, has been made vividly clear by the twelve days of smog alerts during a heat wave in Ontario this month.

It is apparent that 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 US. Canadian environmental groups took the first step towards a legal challenge if the US Environmental Protection Agency does not take action on the emissions from the 250 US 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 NS by 25% this year and 50% by 2010 resulting in about 36 thousand 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 Ecology Action Centre's new **Steer Clean Vehicle Scrappage 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 10-15% of Nova Scotia's car fleet that is older and contributes a remarkable 50% of the vehicle-related smog-forming emissions.

So, let's turn the issue of smog, in which a plethora of contributing sources conspire to create a problem, on its head and make our actions count for something positive. You choose how: 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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