

Putting a stop to smog

Group plans campaign to educate D.C. region

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Increasing temperatures as spring heads toward summer conjure thoughts of sunshine, sandals and floppy hats.

Keeping smog out of the picture is the job of the summer-long Ozone Action Days, an annual, regional education campaign that began Wednesday.

In the upper atmosphere, ozone protects Earth from the sun's ultraviolet rays, but ground-level ozone is the lung-irritating pollutant known generically as smog.

During the summer months, warmer temperatures convert volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides from automobile and industrial emissions to ozone. High ozone levels typically occur between 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. on hot sunny days with little or no wind. Ozone usually dissipates after sunset.

As part of the Ozone Action Days program, Alexandria's Environmental Quality Division has added a real-time ozone alert on the city Web site, www.ci.alexandria.va.us/tes/eq/ozone.

Individuals can make a difference in air quality, said Lalit Sharma, Alexandria's program supervisor.

"These things add up," Sharma said. "It's a region-wide problem not unique to Alexandria. If everyone pitches in, we can make a difference."

The Ozone Action Days program has four color-coded air-quality levels: green for the best air quality, followed by yellow, orange and finally red for the worst, most unhealthy air quality. The Washington region had three code red days in 2001,

with an average of 4.8 days during the past five years, said Lorrie Pearson, Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Ozone Action Days coordinator.

Making a difference means modifying habits with the environment in mind, he said, including avoiding use of oil-based paints and solvents on code red days. To promote use of public transportation on the worst air quality days, bus fare is waived on code red days on Alexandria's DASH Bus, Fairfax County Connector, Arlington County ART, Fairfax City CUE and Metrobus systems.

The Council of Governments posts the current air quality and the following day's forecast is posted by 3 p.m. daily on the Web site, www.mwcog.org. A region-wide air quality hotline also is available at (202) 962-3299.

While everyone should be careful while working outdoors on the most polluted days, Pearson said the code red days can be especially harmful to people with heart or respiratory ailments such as emphysema, asthma or chronic bronchitis.

The public can make a real contribution to the region's overall air quality, said Justin R. McNaull, a spokesman with AAA Mid-Atlantic.

"This is about empowering people," he said. "We don't have to accept that there are smoggy days."

McNaull serves on the board of directors of Clean Air Partners, a nonprofit group devoted to air quality public education. Formerly known as ENDZONE Partners, the Clean Air Partners group was created by the Council of Governments and the Baltimore Metropolitan Council to raise awareness of how individuals contribute to air pollution.

There are advantages to considering the environment before doing summer yard work. Checking the air quality as part of routine chores could afford more time to sip a tall glass of lemonade in the backyard hammock.

"Who needs an excuse not to mow the grass?" McNaull said.