

Roth: Reasons to stay 'air aware' in Oklahoma

By [Jim Roth](#), Director and Chair of the Firm's Clean Energy Practice Group. This column was [originally published in The Journal Record](#) on May 21, 2018.



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Often Missouri is referred to as the Show Me State, yet we Oklahomans also typically like to see things ourselves to believe them. Yet, there are realities around us too opaque for the human eye, such as air quality and impacts to our health.

Thursday's ozone warning, a second warning this month, was just such a reality reminding us of the rising temperatures

and the growing dangerous levels of particulate matter that rise with warmer months in Oklahoma's more urban areas. The Air Quality Index forecast, which prompted the warning, showed an AQI of 101, a level described as "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups." The accompanying health message indicates that "active children and adults, and people with lung disease, such as asthma, should reduce prolonged or heavy exertion outdoors."

Now before you rejoice that an ozone warning simply provides a great excuse to put off mowing your lawn, for many Oklahomans it's a much more serious challenge to their day. But first, let's understand what makes up the ozone levels and the accompanying dangers.

This amazing Earth of ours has both naturally occurring and human-made pollution, which together create air quality issues impacting human health. And while I recognize a few (a very few, mostly political scientists, not science scientists) outliers still refute the enormous scientific consensus that human activity leads to climate impacts and climate change, have you ever noticed that our ozone health warnings usually apply only to Oklahoma City and Tulsa areas, where humans congregate and commute, where factories churn out industrial output, where cars, homes and buildings emit pollutions by their very existence? But I digress.

The Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality does a great job monitoring the air quality across Oklahoma and providing advice and warnings to the public when conditions could be hazardous to our health. Bad air quality can affect everybody's health and can be particularly harmful to fast-growing young children and aging seniors with reduced immune systems. It even has direct economic impacts through loss of working days and increased health care costs. It can also have harmful effects on sensitive vegetation and ecosystems.

And while we can make a marginal difference ourselves, the

enormity of the situation really requires collective group efforts, which is why the Clean Air Act and related environmental regulations are designed to protect those vulnerable Oklahomans on days like Thursday. Ozone is one of six common air pollutants identified in the CAA, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency calls these “criteria air pollutants” because their levels in our outdoor air need to be limited based upon health criteria for Americans.

Ground-level ozone is the primary component of smog and it forms when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds chemically react with sunlight of hot, windless days. Bad ozone itself is not emitted directly into the air, but is created from that chemical reaction (from other polluting resources emissions) when in the presence of sunlight. These pollutants come from a variety of sources including electric power plants, cars and trucks, construction equipment, gas-powered engines of all kinds, industrial facilities and even your backyard charcoal grills.

Unhealthy levels of ozone can cause increased risk of respiratory infection, throat irritation, coughing, shortness of breath, aggravation of asthma and other respiratory diseases and can even add dangers to people with diabetes, emphysema and cardiovascular diseases. During higher level of ozone days, the risks and impacts are made worse by activity and exercise outside.

There are actions that each of us can take to alleviate the risk, reduce air pollution and protect our health. If interested, please check out AirNow at the EPA website for some great tips: airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=resources.whatyoucando.

Also, in Tulsa please consider INCOG's site: www.incog.org/Environmental_Planning/environment_air_quality.html.

And in Oklahoma City, ACOG's site: www.acogok.org/transportation-planning/air-quality/ozone-alert-days.

So in addition to being "weather aware" this time of year, it makes sense for us Oklahomans to be "air aware" too, even if you can't see the pollution with your own eyes. Trust me, your lungs and bodies know it's there.

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