

UNDERSTANDING AIR QUALITY ISSUES IN THE NORTHEAST

Background

While largely known for the harmful impacts of acid rain on the northeast's forests and streams, the health of residents has also been harmed by a suite of air pollutants including nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide. Happily, much progress has been made over the decades to protect the health of the region's residents and special places.

In 1967, recognizing that air pollution is often a regional issue, Governors created Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management (NESCAUM). NESCAUM consists of the air agencies for Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey and New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

The 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments to U.S. law included the creation of the revolutionary Acid Rain Program to reduce pollution associated with acid rain. Between 1990 and 2015, total deposition of inorganic nitrogen decreased by 56 percent in the northeast and total deposition of sulfates in the region decreased by 74 percent.

Northeastern states have been hampered in their efforts to achieve federal standards for healthy air because of the transport of power-plant pollution from Midwestern states. EPA established the Cross-State Air Pollution Rule (CSAPR) to help reduce the amount of air pollution that flows into Northeastern states from outside the region.

Northeastern states have been leaders on several air quality management issues. In addition to being among the first to recognize that air quality is a regional issue, the region was an early mover in the effort to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change with the creation of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI). Northeastern states were also early adopters of standards for cleaner gasoline and greenhouse gas standards for passenger vehicles.

Northeastern states have exemplified the partnership between state and federal law and policy to provide the healthy air that its residents and environment require.

Talking Points

Technologies exist that can greatly reduce air pollution from a variety of sources. These include fuel efficiency and pollution standards for cars and trucks, cleaner wood-burning stoves, scrubbers and other pollution controls for coal-fired power plants, and transitioning to energy efficiency and renewable energy.

State and local elected officials, working with their state and regional air quality agencies as well as federal authorities, can help develop new incentives for people to take action to reduce their own emissions, such as buying more fuel-efficient cars and cleaner wood-burning stoves for their homes, switching to renewable energy like rooftop solar and boosting their own energy efficiency. State and local elected officials can also support programs that address a range of pollutants from large sources like powerplants including the transition to renewable energy.

Regional partnerships such as RGGI can help address air quality issues as well as climate change--- and can be good for both air quality and the economy.

Regional partnerships are one way to start to get at some of the bigger issues at large in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic (as air doesn't recognize state boundaries) and can have massive benefits to both public health, savings to consumers and job creation, and effective control of pollution.

- RGGI state economies have grown by 25 percent, outpacing growth elsewhere.
- Public health benefits from RGGI are valued at \$5.7 billion.
- Energy efficiency measures and renewable energy installations funded by state RGGI programs—have saved consumers \$785.8 million on their energy bills to date, with billions more expected over these measures' lifetimes.¹
- RGGI has boosted regional employment by more than 30,000 job-years. (A job-year is just like it sounds: one year of full-time employment for one person.)

Federal action and strong enforcement from EPA are ultimately needed to deal with cross-state issues.

While Northeastern states have made significant strides on cleaning the air in the region, federal enforcement of existing standards is an essential component of dealing with this major problem. Northeastern states need federal action to make sure pollution from Ohio and Kentucky are not hurting their citizens. Furthermore, more ambitious efforts through additional action by EPA, legislation or executive action must be taken to reduce pollution.

https://www3.epa.gov/airmarkets/progress/reports/acid_deposition_figures.html#figure3

¹ https://www.rggi.org/docs/ProceedsReport/RGGI_Proceeds_Report_2015.pdf