

Report Ranks Rowan Air Quality Among the Worst

By Steve Huffman in April 29, 2005, issue of the Salisbury Post

CENTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The American Lung Association announced Thursday that Rowan County's air continues to be among the worst in the nation.

Lung Association officials said that Rowan County received a failing grade in its State of the Air: 2005 report.

The report says the county's air ranked 18th on the list of most ozone-polluted counties in the United States. The county jumped from 20th on the list a year ago. In 2003, it ranked 16th.

"Getting an F means that dirty air threatens the lives and health of far too many of our neighbors," said Deborah Bryan, chief executive officer of the American Lung Association of North Carolina. "We need to continue to support the Clean Air Act and ask our congressional leaders to stand up to corporate polluters and help us clean up our air."

The State of the Air: 2005 cites recently published studies showing that as ozone levels increase, the risk of premature death increases.

Ozone is an extremely reactive gas that irritates the respiratory system and can kill people with severe respiratory problems. Children, the elderly and those with asthma or other lung diseases are most at risk.

Dr. John Wear, director of Catawba College's Center for the Environment, said the local air could stand some improvement, no doubt.

But he said the poor report from the American Lung Association is no reflection on officials from Salisbury and Rowan County who are working to confront the problem.

"The F rating doesn't pertain to our efforts," Wear said. "Lots is being done to improve the local air quality."

He said Rowan County's poor air rating may pertain more to its proximity to Mecklenburg County.

Wear noted that whereas Mecklenburg County had 35 orange alert (meaning the Air Quality Index is unhealthy for certain groups) days in 2004, Rowan County had 52 such days.

"We're downwind from Charlotte," Wear said.

He said it takes time — and distance — for car exhaust fumes to convert to a level where they adversely affect the ozone. The car exhausts that are emitted in Mecklenburg County are probably being read in Rowan County, Wear said.

He said a more revealing indication of the area's air problem is reflected in an American Lung Association report that lists the Charlotte/Gastonia/Salisbury metropolitan area as having the 12th-worst ozone level in the United States.

That, Wear said, lumps Charlotte in with the entire area over which its exhausts spill.

"It's going to take a regional change to have the effect we're going to need," Wear said. "This is something we can't correct on our own."

He noted numerous local efforts to improve air quality and ozone ratings.

For instance, Wear said the city of Salisbury and Catawba College have merged forces for a study of what it takes to produce a healthy tree canopy. He noted that trees absorb any number of pollutants while also producing oxygen.

Wear said Salisbury's efforts to begin using bio-diesel fuels for city-owned vehicles with diesel engines is also a step toward ridding the air of pollutants.

Rowan County officials are doing their part through the formation of an Air Quality Commission, he said.

The Rowan-Salisbury School System made great strides, Wear said, by getting a grant that paid for the retrofitting of its buses with catalytic converters that reduce emissions.

Wear said Rowan County residents can take steps to insure their health by keeping a watch on daily Air Quality Index ratings. In addition to the 52 orange warnings the county received in 2004, there were another nine days where the county received a red rating, meaning the air is unhealthy for virtually everyone.

Wear said that on hot summer days — where ozone levels typically reach their worst readings — joggers may be advised to take to the streets in the early morning hours when the air is cleanest. Family activities are better held inside on days where orange or red warnings are in effect.

“Evidence is mounting each year underscoring just how dangerous air pollution really is,” said Dr. John O’Neil, a volunteer with the American Lung Association. “The more we learn, the more critical cleaning up the air becomes.” ■