



Background on “Background Ozone”



In November 2014, [EPA](#) proposed new regulations to tighten ground-level ozone standards to between 70 parts per billion (ppb) and 65 ppb.

Unfortunately, the thresholds for the new proposed standards are so low, some of our nation’s most pristine areas—even [national parks](#)—could find themselves out of compliance, primarily due to high levels of “background” ozone that exist naturally in ambient air or are present due to factors [beyond local control](#).

States and businesses have worked extremely hard to cut ozone over the years, and it’s worked: [According to EPA](#), ozone levels are down nearly 20 percent over the last decade and by 33 percent since 1980. But in regions across the United States, and especially in the West, the new standards would require authorities to reduce ozone levels below what may actually be physically possible.

Background ozone can come from a variety of sources—some [natural](#), others industrial. For example, [two](#) recent U.S. studies [cited](#) strong global winds (called westerlies) as the transport means for compounds such as ozone to be carried across the Pacific Ocean from Asia. Many of the most iconic U.S. national parks, including the Grand Canyon, the Great Smoky Mountains, Zion and Yosemite, all would be in non-attainment counties if EPA lowered the ozone standard to 70 ppb. Additional parks, including Yellowstone, Mesa Verde and Acadia, would fall into non-attainment at 65 ppb.

AAPCA Report

The Association of Air Pollution Control Agencies [recently released a survey of states’ views](#) of EPA’s proposed ozone rule. According to its report, 59 percent of the states that responded expressed concerns about background ozone and their ability to avoid harsh economic penalties for non-compliance.

EPA alleges it has a plan to deal with background ozone, under what it calls the “[exceptional events exclusion](#).” However, a clear majority of states believe that EPA’s tools to address these concerns are limited and inadequate.

What Experts Are Saying

“I am concerned that some of the lower standard proposals, namely the .060 to .065 ppm ranges, are getting seriously close to the ambient background levels of ozone. The closer the standard gets to background levels, the greater the impact will be of long-range transported pollution from other countries and ships at sea. These are sources over which local air districts have no control.”

[Eldon Heaston](#), Executive Director/Air Pollution Control Officer, Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District

“Many of these parks, such as Canyonlands in Utah, are located far from any significant emission sources. ... [O]zone values have remained fairly constant over the last 20 years and are routinely above the proposed range of 60 to 70 ppb (.060 to .070 ppm). It is also apparent from this figure that the problem is widespread throughout the intermountain west and is not limited to parks that are close to urban areas or to energy-producing areas.”

[Amanda Smith](#), Executive Director, Utah Department of Environmental Quality

“Big Bend National Park [in Texas], out in the middle of nowhere, has a 66 ppb level. So if they set the standard at 65, Big Bend’s in violation. How do you solve that?”

[Dr. Michael Honeycutt](#), Toxicology Division Director, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality