

Air Pollution Standards for Health

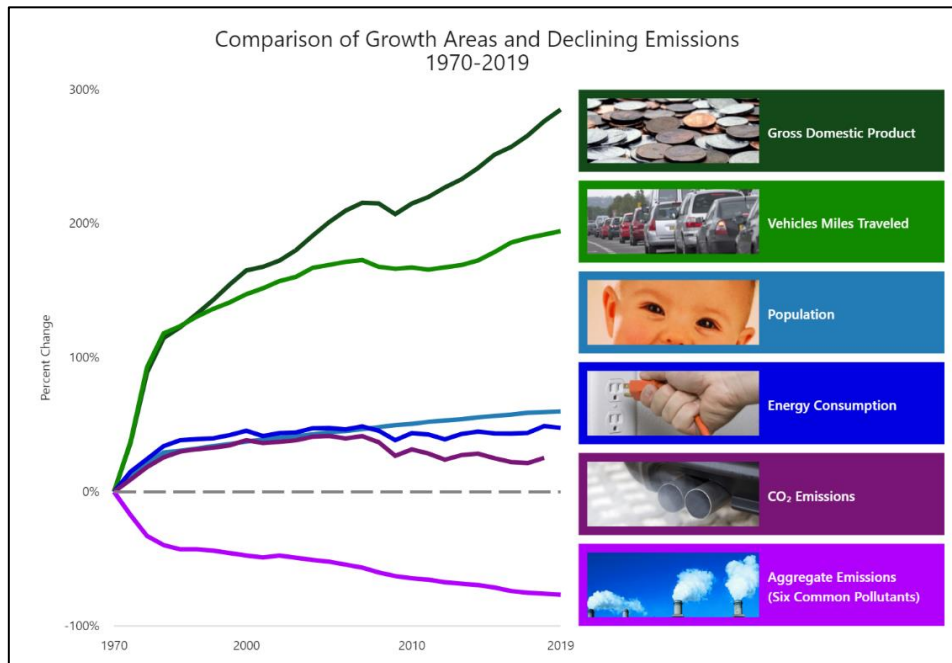
National Ambient Air Quality Standards must protect health.

The Clean Air Act requires EPA to set health-based limits, called National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS), for six dangerous outdoor air pollutants: ozone, particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and lead.



Protecting public health - with an adequate margin of safety - is the sole criterion that EPA can consider when setting an air quality standard, as affirmed by a unanimous Supreme Court decision in 2001. Congress intentionally decided that other factors, including cost, would best be addressed in determining how to meet the standard after it's been set.

Using this process, the Clean Air Act has saved lives and improved health while growing the economy, as the chart below shows.



To ensure the continued success of the Clean Air Act in protecting public health from air pollution, the NAAQS must continue to be based solely on health science and must be fully implemented and enforced.



Reviewing Standards: EPA must review the science every five years, and if necessary, update the NAAQS to protect public health.

- When Congress wrote the Clean Air Act, they recognized that the science on the health impacts of air pollution would continue to grow. Thus, the law requires EPA to review the science every five years and update the air pollution standards, if they're found inadequate to protect public health based on the current science.
- EPA's most recent review of the ozone and particulate matter standards in 2020 failed to meet the requirements of the Clean Air Act.
 - The reviews were rushed and inadequate. EPA started late and eliminated key steps of the process.
 - EPA also disbanded or failed to convene expert advisory panels to review the research and advise EPA's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee about their findings.
 - The science is clear that both the ozone and particulate matter NAAQS are not strong enough to protect the public, but EPA failed to strengthen them after this rushed review. EPA must now move forward to follow the science and set significantly stronger ozone and particulate matter standards.

Enforcement: EPA must enforce air quality standards by identifying which areas have too much pollution and working with the states to develop a plan that results in real cleanup.

- The Clean Air Act requires that once EPA adopts standards based on the health science, it must work with states to identify which areas do not meet the standard and require cleanup.
- EPA is currently working with states with areas that fail to meet the most recent, 2015 ozone standards. Under the Clean Air Act, these states must develop an enforceable, effective cleanup plan that will enable them to meet the standards. However, EPA is taking steps to make it easier to exempt polluted areas from cleanup requirements.
- Unfortunately, EPA has also weakened its nearly 40-year-old policy about what constitutes "ambient air." This allows polluting sources a bigger surrounding area that does not have to meet the NAAQS. This change could affect millions of Americans who live in areas that experience these pollutants emitted directly from the factories, power plants and other facilities in their community.
- EPA has also considered easing requirements for coal-fired power plants to get permits to increase emissions of pollutants, especially sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. That Clean Air Act requirement, called New Source Review, would be drastically weakened for power plants as part of the EPA's Affordable Clean Energy proposal.

For more information:

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