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ENVIRONMENT

Ozone Strikes Again: D.C. Receives ‘F’ in 2026 State of the Air

Burdened by Ozone Pollution, City Works to Clean Air and Protect Residents

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FILE The nation’s capital is still working to meet its clean air goals, after the District received an "F" for ozone pollution and "D" for short-term particle pollution in the American Lung Association's 2026 State of the Air report. (Robert R. Roberts/The Washington Informer)

While the nation's capital is making strides toward reducing air pollution in the region and mitigating its effects, ozone pollution still stands between Washington and its clean air goals, with D.C. receiving yet another failing grade in this category in the **American Lung Association's** (ALA) 2026 State of the Air (SOTA) **report**.

"The report, from our perspective, is an opportunity to take a pause and have people… think about the air they breathe," Aleks Casper, ALA's director of advocacy, told The Informer.

This comprehensive assessment evaluates regions' air quality based on their scores in three categories: ozone, short-term particle pollution and year-round particle pollution. Per the 2026 report, which analyzes air quality between 2022 and 2024, 44% of Americans are living in areas with failing scores for ozone and particle pollution.

Washington received an "F" grade for ozone and a "D" for short-term particle pollution, but achieved a passing grade in year-round particle pollution and saw improvement in the category across each monitored area.

"We're showing improvement… as a whole [metropolitan] area, but we still have that failing grade in ozone, so I think that's really important for people to be aware of," Casper continued. "That progress is fragile and we need to continue to take those steps to protect [it], not only locally in the District, but at the federal level too."

Although the ALA's report provides Americans with an extensive examination of the air quality in their areas, it is not the only resource used to determine where a city or region needs improvement.

Under the **Clean Air Act**, the **Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA) is required to establish the **National Ambient Air Quality Standards** (NAAQS) for six "criteria pollutants" that endanger public and environmental health: carbon monoxide, lead, particulate matter, ozone, nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide.

The air quality design values set by the EPA show air quality not impacted by exceptional events— polluting instances that are unpredictable or uncontrollable. Through this style of evaluation, a region could still be regarded in attainment of air quality standards while residents are still exposed to unhealthy levels of ozone and particulate matter.

Per the EPA's **Green Book**, Washington is currently considered in attainment for all categories except ozone.

Joseph Jakuta, director of **air quality** at the **Department of Energy and Environment** (DOEE), told The Informer that the city has clean data on ozone but still needs to submit a maintenance plan to the EPA on how this progress will be sustained.

"For the first time ever, we've now been compliant with all the federal air quality standards," Jakuta said. "In the big picture, we've made a lot of progress, and I'm really excited about that,… [but] there are also some areas where we still need to see improvement."

The Future is Electric

Ground-level ozone is formed when a reaction between nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds occurs in sunlight or extreme heat. According to the ALA, ozone levels worsened in 2023 due to extreme heat, and particle pollution increased due to the blanket of smoke brought forth by the Canadian wildfires that year.

Between 2022 and 2024, 219 counties in 36 states and the District received a failing grade for ozone levels — the highest number since the 2016 SOTA.

"It's very hard to stop all exposure to unhealthy air, but if we're able to at least put up some guardrails to make things as healthy as possible, that's what we at the [ALA] are really looking for," Dr. Bobby Mahajan, national spokesperson for the ALA and chief of interventional pulmonology for the Inova Health system, told The Informer.

FILE Smoke drifts into the D.C. area from the Canadian wildfires in 2023. (Kayla Benjamin/The Washington Informer)

Emissions from mobile sources and transported pollution from upwind states are the primary causes of ozone in Washington. According to the DC Department of Energy, **90%** of the city's pollution comes from outside its boundaries.

Jakuta told The Informer that the city was set to move forward with implementing California's **Clean Cars for All** program, which allows for lower-income residents to trade in their old vehicle for a clean air vehicle, but the process has been stalled. Regardless, the District is still putting great effort into investing in vehicle electrification.

Aside from working toward electrifying the city's bus system, the **Department of Public Works** (DPW) has transitioned approximately 10% of its municipal vehicles to electric or plug-in hybrids. Prioritizing such initiatives has allowed the District to rank second in the nation for electric vehicle registration, per the Alliance for Automotive Innovation's **Get Connected Electric Vehicle Quarterly Report**.

"We're impacted by Maryland and Virginia and all the vehicle traffic there," Jakuta said. "We're doing what we can, but… it's really tough to completely solve the problem if our upwind neighbors aren't doing their part."

Communities of Color Continue Bearing the Brunt

With poor air quality comes extra risk for respiratory illness, lung cancer, exacerbated allergies and other health issues, especially in communities of color. While people of color make up 42.1% of the U.S. population, they constitute 54.2% of people living in counties with at least one failing grade in the SOTA, and are 2.4 times as likely as a white person to live in a community with a failing grade in all three evaluated categories.

In the District, approximately 9.6% of children and 11.4% of adults are diagnosed with asthma, per figures from the ALA's report. Predominantly Black communities in the city are disproportionately affected by asthma, as, according to the Children's National Hospital, children in Wards 7 and 8 are 20 times more likely to visit the emergency room due to the chronic lung disease than children in Ward 3.

"Climate is the most existential threat to health in the world," Almeta Cooper, of the **Moms Clean Air Force**, told The Informer. "For me, it's very personal [because] this is affecting me, my friends, my family and my very adorable seven-month-old grandson."

Cooper was raised with a strong sense of community and has always had a deep love for children, so she constantly champions children's health, especially as it pertains to the environment. She urges people to pay attention to the intersection between race, health and climate change, as it affects their daily lives.

Wards 5, 7 and 8 experience heavy traffic due to proximity to busy roadways and contain bus depots and industrial spaces, all of which contribute to poor air quality.

"That's where these challenges are located, that's where these additional burdens are located, in communities where Black and brown and under-resourced folks are living," Cooper, who serves as national manager for health justice with Moms Clean Air Force, continued.

To develop a plan of action in mitigating pollution and its effects on residents, the DOEE has installed PurpleAir and Clarity Node sensors around the city, especially in these wards, to further their data collection. A federal air quality monitor and four park bench monitors have been installed in Ward 8, as the region previously didn't have regulatory surveillance of its air pollution.

The DOEE has a project coming into fruition, which consists of replacing two of the switcher trains in Ivy City's railyard, as they heavily pollute the District. Now, according to Jakuta, those two trains are running on some of the cleanest diesel engines.

"So, we're really trying to focus on [reducing] pollution in these communities, but we also know that a lot of it is from mobile sources," Jakuta explained. "We're much more limited in what we can do because we can't set emission standards for mobile sources because the Clean Air Act doesn't allow that."

Cooper believes the most important things people can do to remain resilient in areas with poor air quality are to stay informed, speak up with others in the community and take action by communicating with elected officials.

Both Mahajan and Casper advise that people keep an eye on air quality monitors, like the ALA's **AirNow** resource, and also have a plan of action for days when ozone or particle pollution levels are especially high. Wearing a mask outdoors and shifting activities indoors when needed are just some of the things individuals can do to remain proactive in protecting their health.

"Improvement is not quick and fast," Casper told The Informer. "We know that it will be slower, so… continuing to be aware of the issue only helps move that progress."