

One Bad Day a Year Is Enough To Give Oahu Air Quality a Black Eye

New Year's Eve Results in a Grade of "D"

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HONOLULU, HI – “**We have met the enemy and he is us.**” Perhaps no cartoon character’s remark has been more widely quoted than this one from Pogo, star of the cartoon strip drawn by Walt Kelly decades ago. The lovable possum’s quip about man’s polluting habits was published on Earth Day 1971 in a cartoon showing Pogo at a trash dump near his home in Georgia’s Okefenokee Swamp.

If Pogo ever returns from cartoon heaven, he’ll want to avoid New Year’s Eve on Oahu. That’s the night we citizens declare war on our generally clean, healthy environment by exploding tons of fireworks and massively polluting the life-giving air we breathe.

Once again, the American Lung Association (ALA) has given Honolulu County a grade of “D” for short-term particulate pollution – almost entirely because of the annual New Year’s fireworks extravaganza. Our high level of particulate pollution measured during the 24 hours of December 31 during a three-year study was enough to give the county a barely passing grade.

These findings are in the ALA’s annual State of the Air report, which was released today (5/1). The report assesses air quality in the 2003-2005 period throughout the nation as part of the ALA’s ongoing fight for clean air.

Sterling Yee, president of the American Lung Association of Hawaii (ALAH), said the high particulate pollution on New Year’s Eve is more than just a black mark on Hawaii’s reputation; it’s also a danger to the tens of thousands of children and adults who suffer from lung-related disease.

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“More than 150,000 Hawaii residents are afflicted with one or more of these diseases -- pediatric and adult asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema,” Yee said. “Each of them is potentially at risk from particulate pollution, and the American Lung Association of Hawaii therefore continues to seek restrictions on the excessive use of fireworks at New Year’s.”

The report does have some good results for parts of the state in different categories. Honolulu ranks third among the top 25 cleanest U.S. cities for long-term particle pollution, the same rank as in last year’s report. Honolulu County ranks 11th on the list of 25 cleanest counties for long-term particle pollution, also the same ranking as last year. Maui County ranks 8th this year in that category, compared to 5th last year. The county also is among the cleanest counties for short-term particle pollution.

Honolulu was among 45 major cities with no monitored ozone (smog) air pollution in unhealthful ranges. Last year, there were only 34 cities that could make the claim. Maui does not collect ozone data.

Yee said as long as Honolulu continues to receive a poor grade for short-term particulate pollution, there’s no reason to be overly impressed by good results in the ozone and long-term particulate pollution categories. “We still have not improved our grade for short-term pollution caused by fireworks,” he said, “and that’s because of inaction to curb excessive fireworks usage.”

Regarding short-term levels of particle pollution, the ALA report states: *“Short-term, or acute, exposure to particle pollution has been shown to increase heart attacks, strokes and emergency-room visits for asthma and cardiovascular disease and, most importantly, to increase the risk of death. Some of this increase is likely due to the new, slightly lower threshold of unhealthful air recognized in this report, based on the newly adopted national standards for short-term particle pollution.”*

Yee noted that hundreds of thousands of Hawaii residents are vulnerable to particulate pollution. He said exposure diminishes their lung function, causes greater use of asthma medications and increases rates of school absenteeism, emergency room visits and hospital admissions.

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According to the ALA report, findings from recent studies link short-term increases in particle pollution, such as the annual New Year's fireworks binge on Oahu, to:

- death from respiratory and cardiovascular causes, including strokes;
- increased mortality in infants and young children;
- increased numbers of heart attacks, especially among the elderly and in people with heart conditions;
- inflammation of lung tissue in young, healthy adults;
- increased hospitalization for cardiovascular disease, including strokes and congestive heart failure;
- increased emergency room visits for patients suffering from acute respiratory ailments;
- increased hospitalization for asthma among children; and
- increased severity of asthma attacks in children.

Yee said that while ALA is continuing its fight for stronger regulation of pollution sources across the nation, the American Lung Association of Hawaii is engaged in attempts to curtail the annual New Year's fireworks pollution because of the threat it poses to public health.

He said the ALAH supports strict enforcement of existing fireworks-related laws and will continue its efforts to protect the health of Hawaii's vulnerable citizens through a variety of its programs.

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