

Research Brief 4/12/21

The American Lung Association’s Confusion About Pittsburgh’s Air

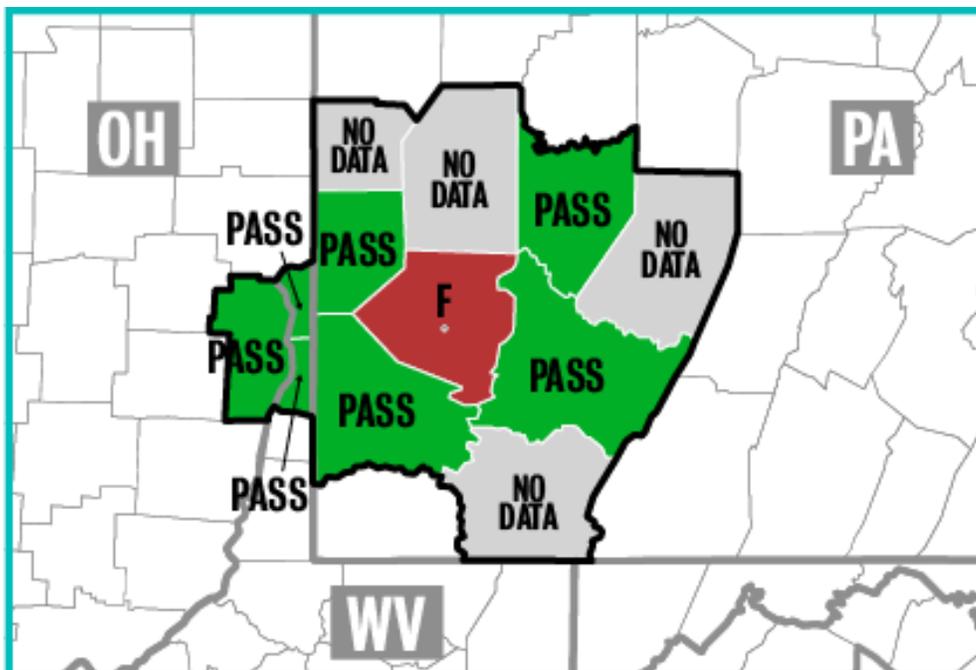
Sometime in April, the American Lung Association will issue a report that says Westmoreland, Washington, and Armstrong counties are among the cleanest counties in the entire country for short-term levels of particulate pollution.

Not one of the counties recorded a single day over a three-year period where peak levels of PM_{2.5} were high enough to trigger any kind of health warning.

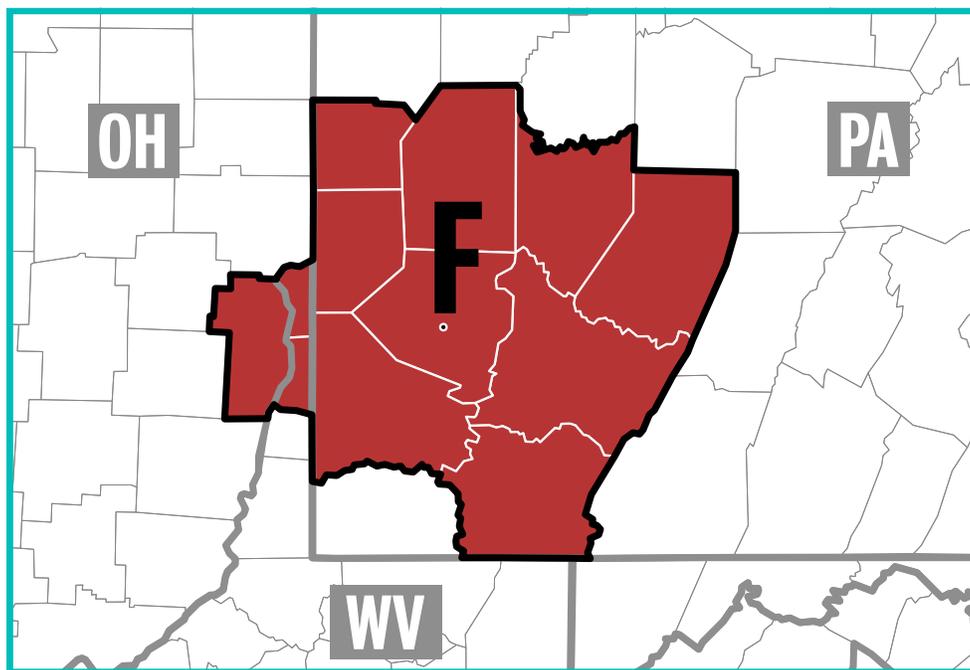
But that won’t be the headline. Instead, the ALA will claim that the 600,000 residents of those counties are “at risk” because they actually reside in one of the “25 U.S. Cities Most Polluted by Short-Term Particle Pollution.”

Confusing, certainly, but that’s how it goes with the Lung Association’s annual *State of the Air* report. Pittsburgh Works Together examined some of the problems with Lung Association’s work in our recent report *Clearing the Air* (pghworks.com/clearing-the-air/). But with the release of the 2021 ALA report upcoming, Pittsburgh Works wanted to explore more in-depth where the report falls short.

It Draws Faulty Conclusions. Here’s a map showing the grades for average annual PM_{2.5} pollution levels in the 12 counties in the Pittsburgh region based on the data that the American Lung Association collected for last year’s report.



And here's the map showing how the ALA used that data to grade the region in 2020.



The Lung Association uses the data from air monitors in Allegheny County to pass judgment on the entire region. It justifies its decision to grade an entire region by the lowest possible scores because, the ALA says, people move around a region and so does bad air. But the ALA's own data shows that there was never enough bad air in the outlying counties to cause concern.

As the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* once described the *State of the Air* report in an editorial: “Thank goodness this isn’t a report on education. If Mrs. Brown had a classroom with 20 students, one of whom was illiterate, the American Lung Association would say Mrs. Brown’s class can’t read.”

Accuracy is essential. When any group – including Pittsburgh Works Together – decides to conduct and release studies designed to influence public opinion and government policy, we have an obligation to get it right and report results as they are — not as we wish them to be.

It Misleads the Public Through a Lack of Transparency. In last year’s *State of the Air* report and in the accompanying promotional materials, the Lung Association was happy to highlight such findings as Beaver County had earned an “F” for ozone and Allegheny County had earned an “F” for short-term PM_{2.5} pollution. But you’ll never find it mentioned that those two “failing” counties were actually in compliance with EPA standards during the time period analyzed by the report.

The 2020 report cites the importance of the federal Clean Air Act more than 40 times before you find an explanation that the Lung Association uses its own standards – not the federal government’s – to hand out its letter grades.

So, when you read in the forthcoming 2021 ALA report that Allegheny County and the entire 12-county Pittsburgh region received an “F” in short-term particle pollution, you should translate that to read:

Allegheny County and the entire Pittsburgh region meet the relevant EPA standard.

The ALA’s claims regarding ozone are even more misleading. The Lung Association will likely claim what it did in 2020: that the Pittsburgh region is one of the worst in the country for ozone pollution. Don’t believe it.

As our report *Clearing the Air* illustrated with the EPA’s own data, the average ozone levels in the Pittsburgh region are lower than 44 of the 50 largest metro areas in the country. And this region has improved its ozone levels faster than nearly every other large metro region in the country. So rather than being one of the worst for ozone, the Pittsburgh region is cleaner and improving faster than nearly every other big-city metro region in the country.

The Data is Out of Date When It Is Published. An overriding problem with the report is that it has seldom been challenged or placed in a broader context. The 2021 Lung Association report will use 2019 data because that is the latest available for all areas of the country, but year-end data for 2020 is currently available for Allegheny County, as it is every year by the time the ALA report is released.

Since the Lung Association bases the Pittsburgh region’s grades and rankings on Allegheny County’s data, the media could use the up-to-date data to conduct its own independent analysis to provide useful context for the Lung Association’s claims.

By the time the ALA report was published in April 2019 using 2017 data, the news coverage could have included the up-to-date news that monitors in Allegheny County had recorded their lowest levels of PM_{2.5} pollution ever in 2018, below the EPA standard for both short-term and year-round levels. Instead, coverage repeated claims such as:

“Pittsburgh’s air quality remains among the worst in the country and shows no signs of improvement, according to the American Lung Association’s annual air quality report.”

In fact, the air quality in the Pittsburgh region is pretty typical for a major metro region – better than some, worse than others – and EPA data show that the region has improved its air quality faster over the past decade than virtually any other big-city area.

When the American Lung Association releases its report describing the supposed failing air quality in Pittsburgh, check to see whether the media coverage includes the fact that for the first time in history, every air monitor in Allegheny County in 2020 recorded levels below EPA standards for every pollutant.

That is, if you want to know the real state of the air in the Pittsburgh region.

It should be based on real data and standards, not numbers that are out-of-date and overhyped to perpetuate a distorted picture that is used to influence public policy and regulation.