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Air quality report long on hot air, short on cold facts

PITTSBURGH – The American Lung Association’s new report continues to mislead the public on air quality in the Pittsburgh region, distorting facts and disregarding accepted air quality standards established by federal regulators, a business-labor alliance announced today.

“Every year that the American Lung Association releases its flawed findings, we will continue to release the facts to set the record straight,” said Jeff Nobers, executive director of **Pittsburgh Works Together**, a coalition of labor unions, businesses and civic leaders. “Every year, the people of southwestern Pennsylvania read and hear the same inaccurate assessments of air quality in our region. You cannot solve problems when you don’t deal in facts.”

Allegheny County and the entire Pittsburgh region met federal air quality standards for tiny pollutant particles (PM_{2.5}) and ozone for 2019-2021, the period covered by the ALA’s *State of the Air* report to be released tomorrow.

Yet the Lung Association tries to portray the region as having some of the worst air in the country, a finding that is contradicted by data in its own report.

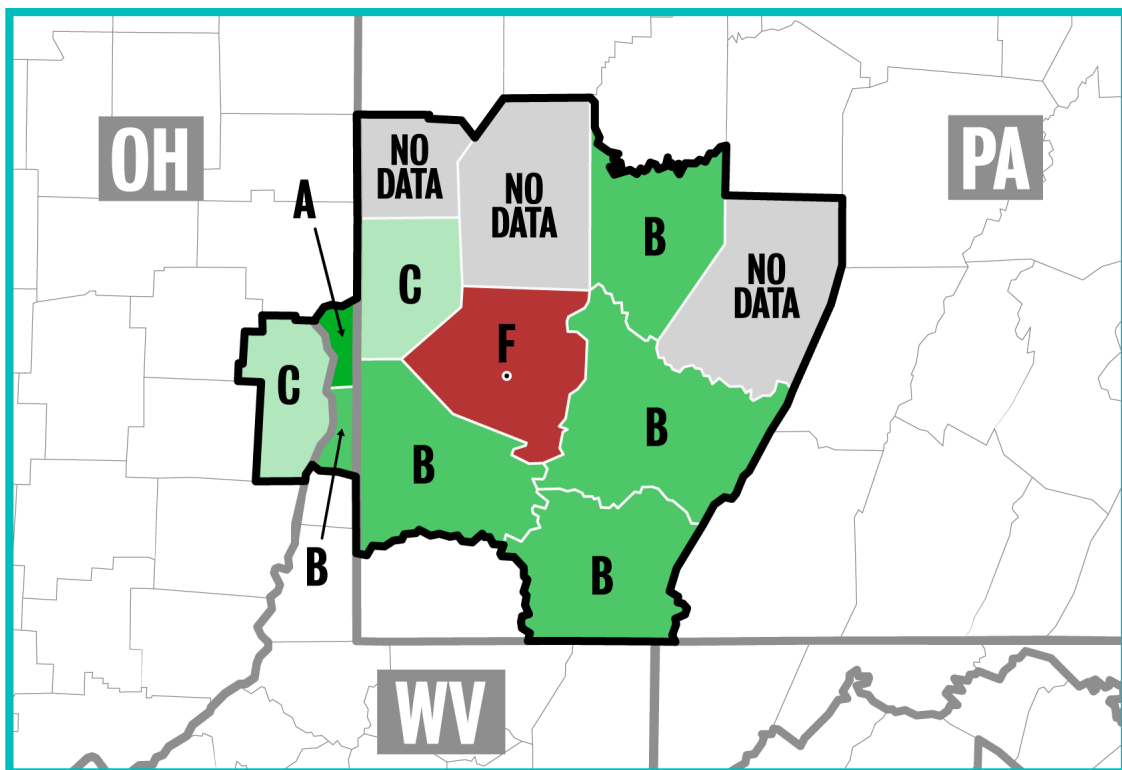
Among other issues with the ALA’s approach:

- The ALA report distorts the region’s actual air quality conditions by disregarding federal standards and awarding Allegheny County grades based on criteria the Lung Association developed on its own.
- The report grades Allegheny County as “F” for short-term fine particle pollution and as “C” for ozone, even though the county complied with EPA standards for both pollutants during the time period (2019-2021) analyzed in the report.
- The Lung Association relies on a few air quality monitors in Allegheny County to pass judgment on a 12-county Pittsburgh metro region that is nearly as large as the entire state of New Jersey. As a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editorial once said: “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."

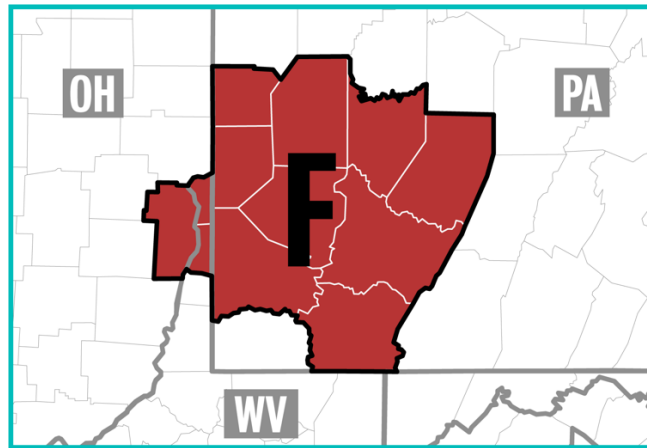
Editor's Note: The ALA selectively releases its report to news outlets under confidentiality terms, so critics do not have the opportunity to review and analyze the data and findings before they are publicized by the media. This is written based on the EPA data sets and methodology that the ALA has used in its previous State of the Air reports.

The flaws in the ALA's approach are most obvious in the report's discussion of daily levels of PM_{2.5} pollution. Here are the grades for each of the counties in the 12-county Pittsburgh metro region the Lung Association analyzes:



One A, five Bs, two Cs, one F, and three counties without any data.

And this is how that translates when the Lung Association grades the Pittsburgh metro region, saying it is among the worst in the country:



Looking further into the data underscores the misleading nature of the ALA’s judgment. Armstrong, Fayette, Washington, and Westmoreland counties score a B on the Lung Association’s grading scale because those counties had one single day over a three-year period in which their daily PM_{2.5} levels rose to where the EPA says “members of sensitive groups may experience health effects. The general public is less likely to be affected.”

But for that single day – July 20, 2021 – those four counties, along with Hancock County, WV, would have made the ALA’s own list of the cleanest counties in the U.S. for daily particle pollution.

Analysis by **Pittsburgh Works** in its [Clearing the Air](#) series of reports uses EPA and other data to illustrate that the air across the Pittsburgh region is fairly typical of a big-city metro region – better than in some places, worse than some others.

The most recent [Clearing the Air analysis from November 2022](#) found that PM_{2.5} rose across all regions of the U.S. in 2021 to levels higher than in the pre-COVID economy, reversing years of improvement. Countering this national trend, PM_{2.5} levels in the Mon Valley in Allegheny County were lower in 2021 than in 2019.

The [Clearing the Air 1.0](#) report and a [2021 Pittsburgh Works research brief](#) include more details on the flaws in the American Lung Association’s reports.

“The ALA’s distortions encourage those who will only be happy when the region’s industries are shut down and all cars and trucks are banned from our streets,” Nobers said.

“Reports like this create an even more divisive battle of ideology and move us further from viable solutions.”

The *Post-Gazette*, in the 2015 editorial quoted earlier, put it this way:

“The American Lung Association has the ability to convey air quality data with more accuracy and sophistication. Yet it refuses, favoring instead annual reports that alarm and deceive. Talk about a pollution source in need of cleanup.”¹

Pittsburgh Works Together is a business- organized labor-workforce-economic development alliance working to grow jobs and expand the industries that are the foundation of our economy, including energy, manufacturing, and construction, to provide opportunity for all.

¹ <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/editorials/2015/05/26/Pollution-source-The-lung-association-s-air-report-deceives-again/stories/201505300017>