

12-1-98

## FACT SHEET

### PROPOSED REVISIONS TO THE POLLUTANT STANDARDS INDEX

#### TODAY'S ACTION...

- ◆ The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is proposing to revise its Pollutant Standards Index to enhance the public's right to know about air pollution across the nation. The Pollutant Standards Index is the uniform air quality index used by State and local agencies for daily air quality reporting to the public. The Index provides general information to the public about air quality and its relationship to public health.
- ◆ EPA is proposing these revisions to reflect updated health information supporting the air quality standards for ground-level ozone (smog) and particulate matter, which EPA revised in July 1997. These proposed revisions to the Index would ensure that consistency is maintained between the new standards and public reporting of air quality and health information. They also update health messages for other pollutants, including carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide.
- ◆ EPA developed today's proposal in close partnership with public affairs and health experts in State and local agencies.

#### WHAT WOULD BE THE BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED REVISIONS?

- ◆ Today's proposal enhances the public's right to know by better providing the public with clear and consistent information regarding the health effects of several air pollutants.
- ◆ This proposal revises the uniform air quality index in order to provide more accurate and specific information on health risks associated with exposure to air pollution. This, in turn, would help individuals make more appropriate decisions regarding actions to avoid or reduce exposures of concern.
- ◆ This proposal revises the index that serves as a basis for other programs that encourage the public to take actions to reduce air pollution on days when levels are projected to be in air quality categories of concern to local communities.
- ◆ This proposal would also provide information for a new national Internet website which will include "real time" air quality data and forecasts of summertime smog levels in many states.

## **BACKGROUND**

- ◆ Under the Clean Air Act, EPA is required to establish a nationally uniform air quality index for the reporting of air quality. In 1976, EPA established such an index, called the Pollutant Standards Index, for use by State and local communities across the country.
- ◆ The Index provides information on pollutant concentrations for ground-level ozone, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide. The Index is “normalized” across pollutants so that an Index value of 100 represents the level of the health-based standard for each pollutant and an Index value of 500 represents significant harm level.
- ◆ This Index has been adopted internationally and is used around the world to provide the public with information on several air pollutants.
- ◆ On July 18, 1997, EPA revised the ozone and particulate matter standards, in light of a comprehensive review of new scientific evidence. EPA replaced the 1-hour ozone standard with an 8-hour ozone standard, and supplemented the particulate matter standard with 24-hour and annual standards for fine particulate matter.
- ◆ This proposal was developed with extensive coordination with public information, health, and air quality experts from State and local agencies, as well as input from the general public through EPA-sponsored focus groups. For example, EPA sponsored eight focus groups in major U.S. cities to help evaluate how to most effectively communicate air quality and health effects information. Numerous State and local agencies and associations also participated through workshops to provide comment on the Index revisions.

## **WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC PROPOSED REVISIONS TO THE PSI?**

- ◆ The proposed changes to the Index will maintain the relationship between an Index value of 100 set equal to the level of the standard, as well as establish relationships between concentrations of these pollutants and Index values across the full scale of Index values from 0 to 500.
- ◆ This proposal would add an additional air quality category just above the level of the standard. Currently, Index values from 101 - 200 are characterized “unhealthful.” The proposed changes would establish a category from 101 -150 characterized as “unhealthy for sensitive groups,” and a category of 151 - 200 as “unhealthy.”
- ◆ To the extent that State and local agencies use colors to communicate Index values, specific colors would be required. For instance, Index values of 151 - 200 would have to be

represented as “red” by any agency that chose to use colors to communicate such values. Examples of the use of color in Index reporting include the color bars that appear in many newspapers, and the color contours of the Ozone Map.

- ◆ Under this proposal, there would be some modifications to the sub-indices, or the individual indices for each pollutant, for ozone, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide. These proposed revisions are based on health effects information from the review of the ozone and particulate matter standards, the new ozone and particulate matter standards themselves, as well as information and feedback provided by State and local agencies and the public.
- ◆ This proposal would require reporting of the Index in all Metropolitan Statistical Areas with population greater than 350,000. Currently, this requirement applies to urbanized areas with populations greater than 200,000.
- ◆ EPA is taking comment on changing the name of the Pollutant Standards Index to the Air Quality Index.

#### **WHO WOULD BE AFFECTED BY THE PROPOSED REVISIONS?**

- ◆ This proposal would benefit the general public by providing people with clear and consistent information regarding air quality and associated health risks.
- ◆ This proposal will not impose new burdens on State and local agencies that report the Pollutant Standards Index.

#### **NEXT STEPS**

- ◆ EPA intends to take public comment on this proposal and issue it in final form before the next ozone season starts in May 1999.

#### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION...**

- ◆ Interested parties can download the proposal from EPA’s web site on the Internet under “recent actions” at the following address: <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/oarpg>. For further information about the proposal, contact Susan Stone at (919) 541-1146 or Terence Fitz-Simons at (919) 541-0889 of EPA's Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards.
- ◆ EPA’s Office of Air and Radiation’s home page on the Internet contains a wide range of information on air pollution programs. The Office of Air and Radiation’s home page address is: <http://www.epa.gov/oar/>.

