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LOCAL

New Mexico's oil and gas counties among the most air-polluted in the state amid recent boom

Study from American Lung Association showed highest ozone levels on record between 2017 and 2019.

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Story Highlights

Eddy and Lea counties in Permian Basin given failing grade for ozone pollution.

Metro areas in New Mexico also suffered from heightened pollution.

Group advocates for greater controls on emissions from fossil fuel development.

As oil and gas boomed in New Mexico in recent years, air pollution spiked in areas of heavy fossil fuel operations, per a new report from the American Lung Association.

The Association's annual State of the Air Report, published Wednesday, showed increases in ground-level ozone in both Eddy and Lea counties in southeast New Mexico in the prolific Permian Basin shale play, and assigned both counties an "F" grade.

The 2021 report covered 2017, 2018 and 2019 – years that saw an historic increase in oil and gas production before the COVID-19 pandemic led to the industry's decline.

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Other counties given a failing grade included other oil and gas areas like San Juan County in the northwest San Juan Basin, a region known for mining and natural gas production, along with urban centers Bernalillo and Dona Ana counties.

Albuquerque in Bernalillo County was ranked as the 26th most polluted city in the U.S. based on ozone levels, worsening from its past ranking of 42nd while Las Cruces, near the U.S.-Mexico border, also climbed up from 17th in last year's report to 13th in the 2021 report.

Los Angeles was ranked as the nation's most polluted, followed by three other cities in California with Phoenix at number five.

Eddy County was ranked 24th of the 25 most polluted counties in America, per the report, one of only two rural counties on the list.

Eddy, Lea, Bernalillo and Dona Ana all saw increases in ozone levels during the three years of the study.

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Ground-level ozone is created when sunlight interacts with volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as benzene, which are often byproducts of oil and gas production or vehicle emissions.

To receive a passing grade from the American Lung Association, a county must have an average of 3.2 high-ozone days each year.

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Eddy County was rarely passing since 1996, data in the report showed, as the county was below the passing benchmark between 1999 and 2005 but spiked subsequently for an average of 10.7 high ozone days between 2006 and 2008.

Ozone levels lowered after that to above but near the passing rate with slight upticks before dropping down to passing rates between 2013 and 2016.

Then, from 2017 to 2019, high-ozone days rose drastically to averages of 10.5 days from 2016 to 2018 and then 17.2 between 2017 and 2019 – the highest on record per the Association.

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Lea County, which neighbors Eddy to the east and also within the Permian Basin, appeared to perform better throughout the history of the study.

Although Lea was given a failing grade for the latest study, it passed from 2008 to 2018 with zero high-ozone days between 2007 and 2010.

The latest report showed Lea County had four high-ozone days per the latest report from 2017 to 2019, less than a quarter of Eddy's number.

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Laura Kate Bender, national vice president of healthy air at the American Lung Association said it is known that oil and gas production can emit ozone precursors and that can mean higher

levels of air pollution in areas known for heavy fossil fuel operations.

She also worried the Association did not have air monitors in every area where the industry operates or where drilling could occur in the future.

“We know that oil and gas drilling operations lead to some of the precursor pollutants for ozone. We have long called for limits on methane pollution and VOC limits,” Bender said.

“We don’t necessarily have monitors in every area that is impacted by oil and gas operations. We could have unhealthy levels of ozone in areas that people are not being alerted to.”

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JoAnna Strother, senior director of advocacy at the American Lung Association said New Mexico’s air pollution put vulnerable populations like children and seniors at increase risk for medical problems asthma, lung cancer or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Data in the report showed that of Eddy County’s total population of 58,460, about 850 suffered from pediatric asthma in children and 3,614 had adult asthma.

The county also had 2,260 residents suffering from COPD and 20 from Lung Cancer.

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There were 15,514 Eddy County residents listed as children under 18, per the report, and 8,535 adults older than 65.

More than half of the county was considered as people of color, or non-white, at 32,004, the report showed.

“Overall, too many people in New Mexico are impacted by unhealthy air - especially children, those over 65, people with COPD, lung cancer or cardiovascular disease and people of color, Strother said.

“Healthy people can also experience shortness of breath and coughing where air pollutants are high. As New Mexicans spend more time outdoors, these pollution levels put them at increased levels of risk – more must be done to protect our health.”

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At the state level, New Mexico recently enacted stricter methane emission controls on oil and gas operations, which saw input from environmental and industry groups alike.

Under the new rules adopted by the State's Oil Conservation Division, operators were required to capture 98 percent of produced natural gas by 2026 and end routine flaring, the burning off of excess gas, except for in emergencies.

The New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, a trade group representing 1,000 members in each sector of oil and gas in the state, signaled support of the new regulations as a collaborative effort between industry, government and stakeholders.

"New Mexico relies heavily upon the oil and gas industry for our state budget and funding for public schools, and it is critical that these rules allow our industry to continue to create jobs and revenue amid unprecedented economic challenges," read a statement from the Association.

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