

# WA DOH & ECY: Plan to Improve Air Quality Hazard Guidance

## What is changing?

The Washington State departments of Health (DOH) and Ecology (ECY) are recommending the use of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Air Quality Index (AQI) to communicate air quality and associated health risks. We expect this shift away from the current use of the Washington Air Quality Advisory (WAQA) to increase effective risk communication and alignment in public health guidance that will support decisions to protect health.

## Who does this change affect?

This recommendation will affect local clean air agencies, public health, and other agencies that communicate air quality and health information or are involved in making decisions to protect public health during poor air quality events. The authority to implement air quality hazard guidance generally lies at the local level.

Prior to making this recommendation, DOH and ECY invited more than 50 local health jurisdictions, clean air agencies, and state agencies affected by this change to participate in our stakeholder engagement process. We received input from four state agencies, nine local health jurisdictions, and five clean air agencies through two formats: a 10-minute survey and/or a 30-minute interview.

In summary, most responding stakeholders indicated the current practice in which air quality hazards are communicated using both WAQA and the AQI in different contexts is confusing and negatively impacts their ability to clearly communicate air quality and health information. Stakeholders indicated they wanted consistency, alignment with regional partners, and trusted information to communicate to the public.

## Why are DOH and ECY recommending this change to AQI?

Wildfires are increasing in frequency and intensity across Washington state, leading to a rise in exposure to high levels of fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) for our state's residents. This increase in wildfire smoke, one of several sources of PM<sub>2.5</sub>, makes the need for consistent and clear air quality hazard messaging for the public more urgent. Smoke also crosses state lines, and all of our neighboring state and federal partners use AQI, impacting emergency response coordination. The use of two indexes in Washington creates inconsistent risk communication, confusion among the public, and lack of alignment across agencies within and outside of Washington.

AQI and WAQA are tools that are used to communicate current air quality conditions and associated health risks and recommendations to the public and decision-makers. Successful risk communication builds trust and credibility to guide people to in how to reduce exposure in response to air pollution and associated health impacts.

AQI is widely recognized, accessible to the public, and has more available risk communication tools. Using AQI to communicate these risks in Washington improves our ability to collaborate and use the wide variety of communication resources developed by federal agencies, improving consistent communication with the public and decision-makers.

The PM<sub>2.5</sub> thresholds for the hazard levels in WAQA are lower and more sensitive to risk estimates based on epidemiological evidence, which increasingly suggests that

lower levels of air pollution are harmful to health. While difficult to quantify, the confusion resulting from current discrepancies in air quality hazard messaging likely decreases the public's ability to understand and take action to protect their health and makes it harder for agencies to coordinate good public health decisions across jurisdictions.

## When is this changing?



DOH and ECY plan to implement this recommendation no later than April 30, 2022, prior to the next wildfire season.

This will include updates to state websites, maps, and guidance documents. DOH and ECY will also explore opportunities to add more health protective messages to the associated hazard categories in our public health guidance and tools. Until that time, DOH and ECY will continue to support WAQA in communicating air quality issues.

DOH and ECY are accepting feedback on the recommendation to use AQI and implementation through Nov. 30. We will provide additional information regarding implementation after the comment period.

## Where do I go for more information?

To provide feedback or request additional information email [airquality@doh.wa.gov](mailto:airquality@doh.wa.gov).