

May 13, 2008

Sarasota County reacts to new EPA air quality standards

Despite new Environmental Protection Agency air quality standards that will cause the region to more frequently exceed the air quality level defined as “unhealthy for sensitive groups,” Sarasota County’s air quality relative to ozone has actually been improving over the past several years. According to County Administrator James Ley, Sarasota County currently meets or falls very close to EPA standards, thanks to an EPA-approved air quality monitoring program and proactive steps to reduce the county’s own greenhouse gas emissions.

On March 12, the EPA significantly strengthened its National Ambient Air Quality Standards for ground-level ozone, from the 0.084 parts per million that has stood since 1997 to 0.075 parts per million. EPA reviews these standards every five years to determine if revisions are necessary to improve public health and protect plants and sensitive ecosystems.

“To put this in perspective, between 2005 and 2007, Sarasota County exceeded the previous 0.084 parts per million standard on three days,” said Ley. “Had the new standard been in effect, we would have had 19 days that exceeded levels for sensitive groups.”

Sarasota County has exceeded the new ozone levels on four days since they went into effect in March. Ozone is monitored at Paw Park, 4570 17th St., Sarasota; on Lido Key at 450 McKinley Drive; and in Venice at 250 S. Jackson Road.

Ley acknowledged that the new standard will affect how the community is reflected in the American Lung Association’s (ALA’s) annual State of the Air report, which grades air quality across the nation. “For the past several years, Sarasota County has received a grade of D for its ozone levels,” said Ley. “The 2008 report released earlier this month raised that grade to C, reflecting lower ozone concentrations.”

Ley notes that if the ALA uses its historic grading methodology in applying EPA’s new ozone standards, Sarasota County will join numerous other counties throughout the state in a probable grade of F.

“It is important to note that the EPA standard is a peer-reviewed, health-related standard, and that the American Lung Association uses their rankings for different purposes,” said Ley. He also stressed that the region’s air quality has not changed, only the standards by which they’re judged.

EPA will require areas above the new standard to develop a plan of action to improve air quality. Although that plan would be developed by the State of Florida in collaboration with affected local air programs, Sarasota County is one of eight Florida counties that already has an approved local air quality program.

Ley says the county is working to reduce its ozone levels by replacing older, higher-emissions school buses with new models that meet updated air quality standards. Hybrid vehicles have been added to the county’s staff and transit fleets and fueling stations are using biodiesel fuels. The county also is developing a public advisory protocol for days when ozone levels exceed the new “unhealthy for sensitive groups” designation.

For more information about Sarasota County’s air quality programs, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for Air Quality.