



Birmingham meets federal air quality standards for first time in 30 years (Updated)



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The air in Birmingham just got a lot cleaner.

For the first time in decades, Birmingham's air is clean enough to meet federal air quality standards. Lower emissions from steel mills and power plants, such as Alabama Power's Gaston Steam Plant, have contributed to the improved air quality.

For the first time in 30 years, the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency reports

that Birmingham will be classed as "in attainment" of the six primary air quality standards measured by federal officials.

The city had reached compliance with most of the standards in recent years, but still had too much particulate matter floating in the air according to air quality tests. Particulate matter, typically described as soot, is associated with coal-burning power plants, car exhaust, and emissions from heavy industry, such as steel mills.

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management requested that the EPA classify Birmingham as being in attainment based on air testing conducted during the last several years. The testing showed that the city's air actually met the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for fine particulate matter beginning in 2010.

After decades of failing to meet the air quality standards, and recent testing that showed unhealthy levels of pollution around some Birmingham schools and neighborhoods, ADEM and the Jefferson County Health Department were required to draft a plan to improve air quality. That plan resulted in improved pollution controls for several industries, which in turn led to lower emissions.

The progress is long overdue, said Kirsten Bryant, with GASP, an environmental group that lobbies for cleaner air. Bryant said dirty air harms people's health, the economy, and the quality of life for all Alabamians.

Corey Masuca, with the Jefferson County Department of Health, said the agency helped identify the most problematic polluters, then implemented the controls that reduced their emissions.

"We are pleased that the hard work of the ADEM staff and other agencies has resulted in the Birmingham area being designated by EPA as in attainment for all of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards, including particulate matter," said Scott Hughes, ADEM spokesman. "Ensuring all Alabamians have clean air to breathe is a fundamental goal of this Department and we will continue to utilize our resources to fulfill that responsibility."

The pollutants regulated by the EPA, known as the criteria pollutants, include carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen oxide, ozone, sulfur oxides, and particulate matter. Failing to meet the air quality standards can have a profound impact on industrial development. New industries may not be able to get air pollution permits in cities labeled as "non-attainment."

Keith Johnston, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, applauded the news, but noted that the EPA passed new, more stringent standards for particulate matter in December. Birmingham's air finally met the old standard. It remains to be seen whether Birmingham will be able to meet the new standard when it comes into force in a few years.

"What the new attainment designation shows is that the Clean Air Act works. This is a great milestone for air quality in the Jefferson, Shelby and Walker county areas, and we should applaud efforts from everyone in our community who have made efforts to clean our air," Johnston said. "The new designation of attainment today does not mean that Jefferson, Shelby and Walker counties will meet the new, more protective public health standard over the next several years. Our local, state and federal agencies must work to ensure that air quality in our region continues to improve and meets this next milestone, as required by the Clean Air Act."

David Ludder, a lawyer specializing in environmental issues, cautioned that air pollution issues remain, despite the good news. Ludder was formerly an ADEM attorney.

"The recent attainment of federal air quality standards for particulate matter in Birmingham is welcome news, but the public should not be lulled into thinking Birmingham's air is now safe," Ludder said.

"Particulate matter is only one form of air pollution impacting Birmingham. There are also multiple air toxics that can cause cancer and other ill-effects. An [analysis of air toxics published by the Jefferson County Department of Health in 2009](#) found significantly elevated levels of many air toxics. We should all celebrate the attainment of particulate standards ... and then demand that regulators tackle air toxics."

A [report authored by Ludder analyzing the health risks](#) seen in the health department study shows that Birmingham residents have been exposed to elevated levels of many cancer causing substances for years.