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Almost Heaven? West Virginia Contamination Highlights Long-standing Problems with Chemical Oversight in U.S.

by Katie Weatherford

On Jan. 9, a major chemical spill occurred at a storage facility owned and operated by Freedom Industries when a failed above-ground storage tank leaked into the Elk River in West Virginia. Located only 1.5 miles upstream of a major public water system, the spill contaminated the drinking water supply of over 300,000 residents in nine downstream counties.

Like the many [chemical incidents](#) that have occurred in the past, the question that lingers is: how do we prevent similar incidents from happening in the future? This latest incident [highlights](#) the fact that our existing federal and state chemical safety standards are failing to protect American families and communities. We need to ensure that the chemicals used in industrial processes and consumer products have been adequately tested for human health effects, facilities that store toxic chemicals are carefully monitored and regularly inspected to ensure they are following safety standards and procedures, and state and local bodies that issue permits and make siting decisions about facilities that manufacture, process, or store toxic chemicals are fully aware of the risks to local communities.

Limited Data on the Public Health Effects of the Leaked Chemicals

Immediately following the spill, [public interest and environmental advocates](#) focused on collecting and disseminating information to the public on the potential public health risks of exposure to the "licorice-smelling" chemical, known as crude 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol (MCHM), that contaminated the water supply, but their searches revealed little information. Apparently, little research on the human health impacts of exposure to or ingestion of this chemical has been done because it is excluded from oversight under the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 (TSCA), our nation's primary – and outdated – chemical safety law. MCHM was one of approximately 62,000 chemicals in use when TSCA was enacted, so it was "grandfathered" into continued use without having to show it did not have harmful effects on human health.

Several days later, Freedom Industries reported a second chemical called "PPH" had also been stored in the leaking tank. (This chemical has been identified as a mixture of two other products.) More toxicity data has been located for these two chemical products than for MCHM, [according to Senior Scientist Richard Denison](#) of the Environmental Defense Fund, but it is not clear why Freedom Industries added the mixture to the storage tank.

Shortly after the spill, West Virginia's American Water issued a warning to nine counties not to use the water supply. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) subsequently determined a "safe" level of MCHM in drinking water of 1 part per million (ppm), or about one drop per 13 gallons of water, though out of "an abundance of caution" [recommended](#) that the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources advise pregnant women not to drink the water until the chemical could not be detected in the water supply. Jennifer Sass of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) [argues](#) for a lower safety level – only 0.025 ppm; she recommends this lower value be used "not only for pregnant women, but also for nursing mothers, infants (especially those drinking formula made with tap water), young children, the elderly, and people with chronic illnesses."

In fact, the reason we have disagreement about safe exposure levels and so little scientific testing to rely on is because since TSCA was passed, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has only completed assessments of the health hazards of about 200 chemicals, out of the more than 83,000 chemical substances that are included in the TSCA Inventory. Because so little research has been done on MCHM, the legally required [material safety data sheet](#) (MSDS) prepared by the chemical manufacturer contained very little information.

A bill to reform TSCA, called the Chemical Safety Improvement Act (CSIA), is currently under consideration in the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, chaired by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA). While everyone agrees TSCA is not working, there is no agreement on the way forward. [CSIA](#) would not improve the health and safety protections missing from current law; in fact, nothing in the current bill would have prevented the Elk River spill.

State Oversight of Chemical Storage Facilities Lacking in West Virginia

State oversight of laws and regulations for onsite monitoring, inspections, permitting and planning, and preventive assessments is notoriously lax in West Virginia.

Site Monitoring and Inspections

West Virginia has no state law or regulation that requires monitoring or inspections of chemical storage facilities like Freedom Industries. State officials initially said that the site had not been inspected since 1991, but the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has amended this statement and now says that DEP officials inspected the air and soil quality at the site after the property was sold and converted from a tank farm that stored gasoline into a chemical storage facility in 2001, according to [*The New York Times*](#).

But the inspectors did not examine the storage tanks at the site. State officials explained that because Freedom Industries is just a chemical storage facility and not a chemical processing facility, no inspection was required. However, the Freedom Industries [website](#) describes the Etowah River Terminal, where the spill occurred, this way: "...Etowah River Terminal can process large volumes of chemical rapidly, and cost effectively." Whether the state lacked authority to inspect the site or had the authority and simply failed to do so, the important point is that no inspection took place. Better monitoring might have helped to prevent the spill.

Only after the West Virginia DEP received a complaint about an odor near the facility did inspectors from the agency visit the Freedom Industries site. Upon finding that between 5,000 and 7,500 gallons of MCHM leaked into the Elk River from an above-ground storage tank, the department [issued an order](#) citing violations of the state's Water Pollution Control Act and Groundwater Protection Act and mandating Freedom Industries empty several additional storage tanks.

Permitting and Planning

The Freedom Industries facility was only required to have a general storm water runoff permit, which is administered by the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection in accordance with Clean Water Act requirements. This general permit allows for discharges of storm water associated with industrial activity and is intended to apply to activities with minimal environmental impact. Companies with general permits are required to prepare a spill prevention plan and groundwater pollution prevention plan covering those chemicals and submit this plan to the state DEP. The permit also requires the company to immediately report any spills.

Although Freedom Industries had a general storm water permit, vague language in the Clean Water Act [makes it unclear](#) whether the facility must have any precautionary plan in place since it did not anticipate regular toxic discharges. Moreover, although Freedom Industries was required to report the spill to the state, the chemical is not on the list that requires the federal EPA to be notified when a spill occurs.

Freedom Industries was also not required to provide detailed reporting under a 2008 federal law requiring companies to register the chemicals stored with West Virginia's Division of Homeland Security. The law also mandates an emergency planning committee develop an emergency plan for "extremely hazardous" chemicals. Freedom Industries reported it was storing MCHM in accordance with the law. But because MCHM is categorized as an immediate (acute) hazard rather than an "extremely hazardous" material, the information was never shared with the Kanawha Putnam Emergency Planning Committee that develops local emergency response plans.

Source Water Assessments

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, states are required to perform source water assessments for every major public water system and share the results with the public. Each state must establish a [Source Water Assessment Program](#) (SWAP) and have it approved by the EPA. The SWAP must map source water protection areas, conduct an inventory of potential sources of contamination within those areas, determine the susceptibility of public water systems to contamination sources, and release the results of these findings to the public. This information allows communities within a state to better identify risks and to develop priorities for protecting their drinking water.

West Virginia last performed a source water assessment 11 years ago, and its safety plan has not been updated since. The assessment showed that the location of the Freedom Industries facility is within a "zone of critical concern," which "warrants a more detailed inventory and management due to its proximity to the surface intake and susceptibility to potential contaminants." However, as Bloomberg *Businessweek* reporter Mark Drajem [writes](#), "There's no sign [the assessment] was updated to account for Freedom Industries Inc., which bought and converted the facility from storing gasoline to storing MCHM." Although the assessment *recommended* that the nearby public water system collect information on the risks from nearby sources of contamination, it appears no authority acted on this recommendation.

Preventing Future Public Health Disasters

In the wake of the Freedom Industries spill, the state and federal governments are considering legislative action. Only days after the spill made national headlines, Governor Earl Ray Tomblin (D) of West Virginia announced that he is partnering with the secretary of the state DEP to develop recommendations to avoid similar leaks in the future. Legislation was introduced in the state as well, but the [Charleston Gazette](#) writes that as currently written, the bill will do little to prevent similar incidents in the future. At the federal level, West Virginia Sens. Joe Manchin (D) and Jay Rockefeller (D) have also agreed on a [proposal](#) that would require inspections of above-ground storage facilities and require companies to develop emergency response plans.

This is a reversal for Tomblin and Manchin, both of whom have [historically opposed](#) regulation of the coal industry. Just a day prior to the spill, Tomblin said in his State of the State [address](#) that he would "never back down from the EPA." And Manchin has voiced [opposition](#) to EPA's Clean Water Act rules that protect our nation's waterways from mountaintop mining. Even after the spill, Tomblin tried to shift the blame away from the state's unregulated and dirty coal industry, saying, "This was not a coal company incident. This was a chemical company incident." (Since MCHM is used to "clean coal", this is incorrect.)

In fact, for a new oversight standard to be issued in West Virginia, the state legislature must approve anything developed by the DEP. This means that legislators with their own political agendas have an opportunity to delay or entirely reject important safeguards that agency experts have determined are necessary to protect public health and the environment. Legislation proposed in the U.S. Congress, the REINS Act, which Manchin has [co-sponsored](#) in the past and which we have [regularly criticized](#), would inflict this type of review on federal agencies. This process makes health and safety regulations subject to political concerns rather than sound science.

While corporate actors, like Freedom Industries, who behave irresponsibly should be fined and held accountable for the damages their behavior caused, we must also hold accountable our elected lawmakers for failing to develop and enforce the safeguards that would have prevented such an incident from occurring in the first place. Unfortunately, Freedom Industries has already filed for bankruptcy in an apparent attempt to avoid being held accountable for its actions.

State of the Union: What the President Should Say about Inequality and Fiscal Policy

by Nick Schwellenbach

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a "bully pulpit" as "a public office or position of authority that provides its occupant with an outstanding opportunity to speak out on any issue." President Theodore Roosevelt was the [first](#) to call the White House a bully pulpit, and he and other heads of the executive branch have used it as a platform to raise the profile of various issues and push forward an agenda for change. The most regular, high-profile instance of highlighting priority issues is the annual "State of the Union" address (President Franklin Delano Roosevelt first called it that in 1934), where the president addresses a joint session of Congress huddled together in the House chamber.

It is likely that President Barack Obama will touch on many issues related to fiscal policy in his State of the Union speech Tuesday. Some of them have been previewed in recent months; others are simply unavoidable. Then there are topics that he *should* talk about but may not make it into his speech.

What We Expect to Hear: Inequality is Important, Raise the Floor

The president will bring up the extraordinarily important issue of extreme income inequality and economic mobility on Tuesday night. In his Dec. 4, 2013 [speech](#) before The Arc in Washington, D.C., Obama spoke of how "the basic bargain at the heart of our economy has frayed" and how these issues are "the defining challenge of our time." During his eloquent speech, he expounded on how "the combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe." He added, "It is not simply a moral claim that I'm making here. There are practical consequences to rising inequality and reduced mobility," such as a weaker economy, negative impacts to families, and a hollowing out of our democracy.

The evidence is clear: inequality has worsened since the 1970s. The top one percent's share of all income in the U.S. has grown from 7.7 percent in 1979 to 17.1 percent in 2007, or 275 percent, according to a 2011 Congressional Budget Office (CBO) [report](#). Meanwhile, the bottom 80 percent of the U.S. population has seen its share of national income decline slightly.



Source: [Congressional Budget Office](#)

CBO explains that federal tax and fiscal policies *can* reduce inequality in two ways: by lifting the floor for low-income households through policies like the Earned Income Tax Credit, and by taxing high-income households. All economically advanced countries use tax and transfer policies to reduce market-based inequality. But CBO finds the "equalizing effect" of U.S. fiscal policy was larger in 1979 than it is now because the "share of transfer payments to the lowest-income households declined," and "[t]he overall average federal tax rate fell," especially for the richest Americans.

But the middle class has been losing wage income *before* taxes. An [analysis](#) of Social Security Administration [data](#) by David Cay Johnston found that the annual median pre-tax wage of American workers was just \$27,519 in 2012; controlling for inflation, this represents a decline in pre-tax wage income of \$980 from 2007 and is the lowest level since 1998.

There is some disagreement among researchers about whether economic mobility has also been falling over this time period, but all agree that economic mobility is "consistently lower in the U.S. than in most developed countries." Despite our Heratio Algers myths, most people who are born poor in the U.S. stay poor. A new study by economists Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren of Harvard, Patrick Kline and Emmanuel Saez of the University of California at Berkeley, and Nicholas Turner of the Treasury Department's Office of Tax Analysis found that economic mobility has been relatively unchanged over the last half century. But as economist Lawrence F. Katz of Harvard [noted](#), "Because there's so much inequality, people born near the bottom tend to stay near the bottom, and that's much more consequential than it was 50 years ago."

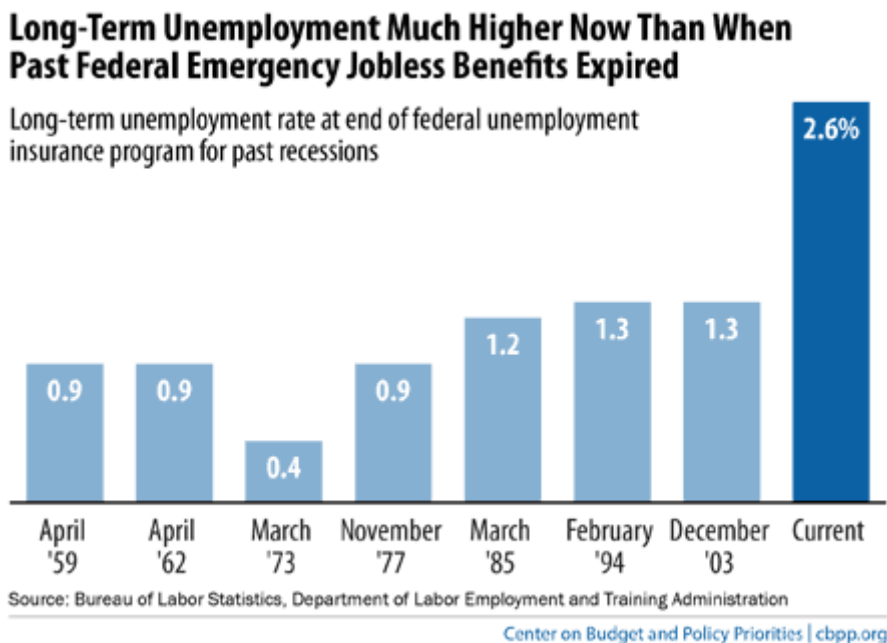
We expect the president to review this evidence in the State of the Union address and then turn to policies that would mitigate inequality by helping those at the bottom of the income and wealth ladders.

The President's Policy Agenda

The White House proposed a federal minimum wage of \$9, up from the current \$7.25, in the last State of the Union address. It has thrown its support behind the \$10.10 minimum proposed in the Fair Minimum Wage Act, sponsored Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Rep. George Miller (D-CA). That bill would raise the minimum wage over two years and then peg future increases to inflation. A broad bipartisan majority of the public supports increasing the minimum wage.

As Roosevelt Institute fellow Mike Konczal [points out](#), an increase to \$10.10 an hour "would reduce the number of people living in poverty by 4.6 million. It would also boost the incomes of those at the 10th percentile by \$1,700." He added, "That's a significant increase in the quality of life for our worst off that doesn't require the government to tax and spend a single additional dollar." Furthermore, the weight of the economics evidence shows "little or no employment response to modest increases in the minimum wage," according a comprehensive literature review by John Schmitt, senior economist with the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Instead, many argue that a higher minimum wage [could spark some additional hiring](#) if workers spend more of their increased income and stimulate more economic activity.

We expect the president to renew his calls for extended unemployment benefits for people in regions with high levels of joblessness. At the end of December, Congress failed to extend emergency unemployment benefits for them, immediately cutting off 1.3 million Americans. This figure has already increased to 1.6 million and could grow to more than 4 million over the course of the year, as their spell of unemployment goes beyond 26 weeks.



Source: [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

As many have noted, in the past, federal extended unemployment benefits were not stopped until the long-term unemployment rate had fallen to a much lower level. Given the continued weak state of the

labor market, it makes economic and moral sense to keep these benefits in place until the number of long-term jobless falls substantially.

The president will no doubt talk about the way the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare, has started helping millions of low- and middle-income Americans gain access to health insurance through subsidized health care exchanges and through an expansion of Medicaid that [many states have not accepted](#). He may urge more states to adopt the Medicaid expansion.

The expansion of early childhood education will probably make a repeat appearance in this year's State of the Union address. The president is committed to "a new federal-state partnership to provide all low- and moderate-income four-year old children with high-quality preschool, while also expanding these programs to reach additional children from middle class families and incentivizing full-day kindergarten policies." And now that the House is producing its own immigration bill, the president will undoubtedly renew his call for comprehensive immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship for the 11.7 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. today. According to the Congressional Budget Office's [analysis](#) of the Senate's immigration bill, legalizing undocumented immigrants would increase tax revenue and produce "net savings of about \$135 billion over the 2014-2023 period."

What the President *Should* Talk About, But Probably Won't

The president is likely to suggest policies that reduce inequality by helping those at the bottom of the income distribution. He should also talk about tax policies that return some of the vast wealth that has accumulated at the top of the income ladder to public purposes. After all, the wealth created by society would not have been possible without the public structures that enable societies, economies, industries, businesses, workers, and consumers to thrive.

The Center for Effective Government [supports a set of policies](#) that would do just this:

- **End offshore tax abuse** (would raise \$220 billion over 10 years) – Multinational corporations have intensified their use of aggressive accounting practices to shift their U.S. profits to offshore tax havens. By some accounts, corporate tax haven abuse alone costs the U.S. Treasury [\\$90 billion a year](#). Nearly \$2 trillion of U.S. corporate assets are currently held offshore – all of it untaxed in the United States.
- **Adopt the Buffett Rule** (\$171 billion over 10 years) – The Buffett Rule would require taxpayers earning \$1 million or more to pay an effective tax rate of 30 percent, around what middle-class taxpayers pay. Seven thousand millionaires paid [no federal income taxes](#) in 2011. In 2009, the 400 wealthiest Americans each had, on average, more than \$200 million in taxable income and [paid less than 20 percent in federal income taxes](#), a rate lower than many middle-income families pay.
- **End subsidies for CEO pay** (\$75 billion over 10 years) – Current tax law allows corporations to deduct limitless amounts of executive pay so long as the pay is based on achieving measurable performance targets. Pending legislation would eliminate the performance pay loophole and cap this deduction at \$1 million per executive per year (companies can still pay their CEOs more;

they just can't write off the costs on their taxes).

- **Abolish the Carried Interest Exception** (\$21 billion over 10 years) – The carried interest exception allows hedge fund managers to pay taxes on their earnings at the 20 percent capital gains rate, rather than individual income tax rates. Taxing the 10 top hedge fund managers' reported incomes at the 39 percent rate instead of the 20 percent rate would produce \$1.9 billion in tax revenue – and leave them among the 400 highest-income Americans.
- **Eliminate "corporate tax extenders" that reward offshore tax dodging** (one-year cost in 2013: \$10 billion) – The corporate tax extenders bill is a package of 30 corporate tax subsidies renewed as a package every year or two by Congress. The cost of the total package when last renewed in January 2013 was nearly [\\$41 billion](#). Of these, two subsidies have little economic value and exist simply to reward companies that have successfully shifted U.S. profits offshore. These [two provisions](#) are referred to as the "active financing exception" and "the controlled-foreign corporation look-through."

More revenue could mean an expansion of job training programs, expansion of early childhood education, and improvements in and modernization of America's aging infrastructure – all things that grow the economy in the long-run and address real needs. This more expansive role of government would go beyond helping just the most vulnerable, but would broadly benefit the middle class, as well.

In budget after budget, the White House has called for expanded infrastructure investments to address critical transportation and other needs that underlie our economy and society's success, as well as spur more job creation since it still lags behind that of past recoveries. It is likely the White House budget proposal for fiscal year 2015 (it will not be released until March) will continue to do so. However, the size of the proposal is already substantially smaller than civil engineers and other experts say is needed.

The Center for Effective Government released a [report](#) in December that identified \$124.4 billion in annual physical infrastructure spending needs. Were funds released for these essential investments, up to 2.5 million jobs would be created.

It's not clear if the president will mention the need for expanded infrastructure investments in his State of the Union speech, but in a mid-January [speech](#) in Raleigh, NC, he announced the creation of a high-tech manufacturing hub and encouraged Congress "to pass the bills that would create 45 of these manufacturing hubs." This suggests he may reiterate his previous calls for these manufacturing and innovation hubs, as well as expanded infrastructure investment.

There is a bipartisan effort in Congress to pass legislation that would give multinational corporations a significant tax break for bringing back the profits they've shifted offshore, if they invest these funds in an infrastructure bank. This is an expensive way to pay for infrastructure – taxpayers would first have to pay for the corporate tax breaks, and then pay again for the infrastructure. The bonds issued to fund infrastructure under these proposals would not count toward the national debt, but they would nonetheless need to be paid back to the multinational corporations that capitalized the infrastructure bank. The president should announce his opposition to such schemes, which reward corporations that have for many years gamed the tax system, and instead call for offshore tax rules to be tightened

immediately, with the revenue generated directed toward creating jobs through rebuilding America's infrastructure.

One policy that the president is [expected to enact](#) just before or shortly after the State of the Union address: raise the wages of private-sector employees working for contractors. With an executive order, the White House will require that any private contractor working for the federal government pay its workers at least \$10.10 an hour. A Demos [study](#) found that nearly two million employees working for government contractors earn less than \$12 an hour, "more than the number of low-wage workers at Walmart and McDonalds combined."

The president will use the White House bully pulpit to push many worthwhile policies designed to improve the economy and the lives of everyday Americans. Some are particularly focused on those at the bottom, with good reason. And the government can and should do more to grow the economy from the middle out. But for the government to do more to build a broadly shared prosperity, it needs resources. The very few at the top who have swallowed most of America's gains in the last several decades need to pay their fair share.

In the wake of the Healthcare.gov rollout [debacle](#), and continuing gridlock in Congress, the president may scale back his agenda and go for smaller compromise wins. Or he could make maximum use of his bully pulpit and swing for the fences. He could outline a true progressive populist agenda for Congress and the American people that sets the stage for fights over policy on both the federal and state levels. We're hoping he swings away.

E-Gov Spotlight: Informing the Public about Air Quality

by Leeann Sinpatanasakul

During the week of Jan. 20, the air quality in Utah's Salt Lake City region and parts of California hit red-alert status – meaning that the air was unhealthy for everyone and was especially harmful to sensitive groups like children, the elderly, and those with chronic respiratory conditions like asthma. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) forecasts and posts air quality levels in an easy, color-coded format on a website called [AIRNow](#). The site offers users a means to explore air quality levels in their area and ways to protect their health against the impacts of air pollution.

What is AIRNow?

The AIRNow website uses the Air Quality Index (AQI) to provide local and regional air quality information in the United States and southern portions of Canada. The AQI compiles real-time data on five major air pollutants (ground-level ozone, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and particulate matter) into a simple indicator of overall air quality. The index has six color-coded categories indicating increasing levels of health concern, ranging from green for "good" to brown for "hazardous."

Developed by the EPA, the color-coded categories allow the public to easily understand what health impacts they may expect in their communities. Excess levels of these air pollutants can have a multitude

of adverse health effects including coughing, wheezing, asthma attacks, and bronchitis. Children and the elderly represent two "sensitive" groups that are more easily affected by air pollution. Those with chronic heart and lung diseases are also at risk, as increased levels of air pollution can aggravate these conditions.

Currently, AIRNow uses data from more than 2,000 monitoring stations to track real-time air quality conditions in over 300 cities across the country. Although EPA is the leading agency running the site, a wide range of federal, state, and local agencies and tribal groups support the site.

Using the Site

The AIRNow homepage presents users with a color-coded map of air quality across the United States. The map also acts as an interface allowing visitors to drill down to state and local level data. Clicking on any state provides the air quality level for all of the reporting locations within that state. Users who want local air quality information for their home, school, or place of business can type in their zip code in the upper right-hand corner and get a results page for the reporting location nearest to the zip code they provided.

The results page offers users several maps of their local area with the real-time air quality data and forecasted conditions for the current and next day. If available, users can get details for specific pollutants and a visibility camera. Each page also provides links for more state and local information regarding air quality and public health, which typically links to state and city websites.

For example, if a resident of Salt Lake City checked their location on the site on Jan. 24, they would have found an orange air quality forecast, which is "unhealthy for sensitive groups." This means that people with heart or lung disease, seniors, and children should reduce prolonged or heavy exertion. On these days, the forecast recommends that people reduce vehicle use by consolidating trips, not use solid fuel-burning devices, and avoid open burning, such as fire pits, fire rings, and campfires. Furthermore, nearby industries should minimize any air pollution emissions.

Many different audiences should find the AIRNow website useful. For instance, the general public, especially those with chronic conditions, can use this information to plan outdoor activities and avoid staying outside for too long on days with poor air quality. Parents and school administrators can use the tool to check conditions in their local neighborhoods before letting children out to play. Teachers can use the publications and other materials on the website to supplement lesson plans and educate students about air pollution. The media and meteorologists can use the information to better inform the public about air quality in their area. The Weather Channel, listed as a media partner on AIRNow, incorporates the air quality forecasts into [national maps](#) provided on its website and its television broadcasts. The Weather Channel website also allows users to [select a state](#) and receive a listing of air quality forecasts for major cities in that state and neighboring states.

The site retains air quality data from the past three years, giving the public a quick window on air quality of previous specific days. After looking up any location, users can obtain archives for AQI map data. However, the website advises that the stored data should not be used for research or regulatory purposes, as it is automated and not constantly monitored. For those purposes, the site directs users to

the [Air Quality System Data Mart](#). There is an AIRNow API site for developers who wish to use AIRNow data for applications and programs.

Other key features of AIRNow include: downloadable publications, a data feed for developers, publications in Spanish, e-mail alerts of daily air quality levels, mobile applications (or apps) for users on the go, RSS feeds, Twitter, and Facebook.

Strengths

A major strength of the website is the extensive real-time air quality data from around the country. This data allows the site to forecast air quality for over 300 cities. The real-time information also gives users, especially vulnerable populations, timely tools needed to make important health decisions and plan their day accordingly.

Another strength is the intuitive presentation of the air quality data, from the simple color-coded air quality levels to the interactive map. Even if an individual is unfamiliar with specific pollutants, the site quickly conveys the most important information – how bad is the air quality and who should be concerned?

The website also deserves credit for using a variety of tools to allow greater dispersal of information. Users can access AIRNow data through free Android and iPhone apps, sign up to receive e-mail notifications, or follow AIRNow on Twitter or Facebook. This diversity of communications methods means that more people will get and use this important data.

Weaknesses and Recommendations

Although AIRNow has much to offer the public, the website has a few limitations, as well. One shortcoming is that only 46 states have real-time data for ozone and particulate matter. These two pollutants can have the biggest immediate effects on human health. Agencies should work with tribal, state, and local agencies to fill this data gap. The real-time air quality conditions and forecast would greatly benefit the health of citizens in these areas.

Another notable limitation is that although some of the air quality publications are available in Spanish, the site as a whole and the alerts (e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) do not have bilingual options. Adding a second language to the site would expand the audience that could use the site. Those who do not speak English are just as likely to face deteriorating air quality, if not more so, and should not be left in the dark about potential air quality risks.

Lastly, while the air quality data is presented very simply and is easy to understand, the organization of the rest of the site could be improved to help users more easily navigate the related information. For example, it was cumbersome to find information on the sources of pollutants, industry sectors that cause pollution, types of activities that produce air pollution, and how to reduce pollution for communities. The alphabetical links section (located on the bottom of the homepage) should be reorganized into issue categories, such as pollutants or educational resources.

Conclusion

Every day, air quality impacts people around the country, often threatening the health and lives of millions of Americans. For this reason, it is critical to have proper and real-time air quality information.

Overall, AIRNow is a transparent, user-friendly, and educational government website for air quality information. The intuitive presentation, real-time data, and diverse means to receive updates speaks well of the efforts made to build a useful tool for everyone. However, there are some improvements that could be made to better reach out to Spanish speakers and to further expand the data.

Sofia Plagakis contributed to this article.



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