



News Release

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Global Pandemic, Wildfire Smoke Impacted Local Air Quality in 2020

Clark County Air Quality Year in Review

Ozone exceedance days increased in 2020, compared to 2019, according to year-end data gathered by Clark County's Department of Environment and Sustainability (DES). What led to the shifts? Regional wildfires that sent smoke into Clark County over several days and a global pandemic, DES believes.

In 2020, Clark County recorded 15 days where ground-level ozone levels exceeded the Environmental Protection Agency's health-based standard for acceptable air quality; an increase of 12 over the three recorded in 2019. While a governor-directed shutdown in March and April led to slight reductions in air pollution for particulate matter and other pollutants due to reduced vehicle traffic, those reductions were dwarfed by regional wildfire smoke influence.

"We were lucky to have had no wildfire smoke influence on our air quality in 2019, but 2020 was tough," said Marci Henson, director of DES. "Wildfires are devastating in their immediate area, but as we've seen in two of the past three years, they can also have a big impact on the environment of communities hundreds of miles away."

"Extreme weather and climate change are playing a significant role in our air quality," added Jodi Bechtel, assistant director of DES, who also oversees the Office of Sustainability. "It underscores the importance of considering larger environmental solutions in Clark County and beyond if we are going to get it under control."

Other findings from the annual review include a slight increase in total air permits written and active operating permits. Decreases were reported in calls received by the department's hotline, inspections conducted and notices of violation. DES's Bechtel pointed to COVID-19 restrictions as the likely factor in the decreases.

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2020 Clark County Air Quality Year in Review, cont.

“The pandemic response has been felt by everyone and in every aspect of our local community and economy,” Bechtel said. “We’ve been able to maintain operations throughout the pandemic, maintaining fast response times to those hotline calls. Nevertheless, we recognize business operations and people’s normal routines were changed, which in turn altered how the community interacts with us.”

The department’s Small Business Assistance Program (SBAP) showed an increase in 2020 over 2019, responding to 2,129 calls from local businesses requesting assistance in completing necessary forms and inventories related to their air permits. For SBAP supervisor Richard Beckstead, the increase means the permitted business community sees value in this service.

“Our Small Business Assistance Program team works very hard to build working relationships with the permitted business community in Clark County,” Beckstead said. “That we increased our calls this year validates the work we do. Best of all, it’s a free service to permit holders.”

With an eye toward 2021, DES officials acknowledge they have to think beyond Clark County’s borders to protect the air we share.

“We will continue our efforts on the local front through permitting, site inspections and monitoring local air quality, but we don’t live in a vacuum,” Bechtel said. “The wildfire smoke we experience from surrounding states underscores the importance of developing strategies to combat climate change and extreme weather with our regional and national partners.”

About the Department of Environment and Sustainability

The Department of Environment and Sustainability is the air pollution control agency, regional Endangered Species Act compliance program and sustainability office for all of Clark County, Nevada. Established as the Department of Air Quality by the Clark County Commission in 2001, it was renamed in 2020 and is comprised of three divisions: Air Quality, Desert Conservation Program and Office of Sustainability. Through these three divisions, DES is ensuring the air we share meets healthful, regulatory standards, administering the County’s Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan and addressing climate change.

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Clark County is a dynamic and innovative organization dedicated to providing top-quality service with integrity, respect and accountability. With jurisdiction over the world-famous Las Vegas Strip and covering an area the size of New Jersey, Clark is the nation’s 11th-largest county and provides extensive regional services to 2.4 million citizens and 45.6 million visitors a year (2019). Included are the nation’s 9th-busiest airport, air quality compliance, social services and the state’s largest public hospital, University Medical Center. The County also provides municipal services that are traditionally provided by cities to 1.1 million residents in the unincorporated area. Those include fire protection, roads and other public works, parks and recreation, and planning and development.