

DEP warns of unhealthy air quality levels along Maine coast Friday

-With hot weather also forecasted, the Maine CDC is encouraging the public to take simple steps like drinking more fluids and resting regularly to best beat the heat-
AUGUSTA – The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is urging the elderly, children and those with heart or lung diseases to reduce their exertion Friday as unhealthy air quality sets in along the state's coast between Kittery and Acadia National Park due to elevated ground-level ozone concentrations.

Meteorologists from the department's Bureau of Air Quality are further forecasting that these unhealthy levels could linger though the weekend as the air mass remains largely unchanged through Sunday, but will issue an updated forecast by 3 p.m. on Friday on its website (www.maine.gov/dep/air).

This is Maine's first air quality alert of 2012. The first last year was on June 8. Similar alerts are being issued for tomorrow for parts of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York.

In addition, particle pollution levels will be in the moderate range for the southwest coastal Maine from Kittery up the coast to Georgetown Friday, exacerbating the effects of ozone pollution and meaning that any individuals in that region who are sensitive to pollution should reduce their exposure and exertion.

Exposure to elevated ozone and particle pollution levels can aggravate existing heart and lung conditions like asthma or congestive heart disease and cause children and even healthy adults to experience reduced lung function and irritation when exerting themselves.

As a result, all Mainers are encouraged to take precautions to protect their health during periods of unhealthy air quality, including avoiding strenuous activity –like jogging– alongside busier roads and during mid-day, and closing windows and circulating indoor air with a fan or air conditioner.

Ground-level ozone, commonly known as smog, is created by the chemical reaction between volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides and sunlight. Man-made sources of these compounds include automobiles; trucks and buses; large combustion and industrial sources such as power generating facilities; household products such as paints and cleaners; and gas-powered lawn and garden equipment.

When ozone levels are elevated, the Maine DEP urges the public to take action and help reduce ozone-smog by choosing a cleaner commute like public transportation or carpooling; deferring the use of gas-powered lawn and garden equipment until after dusk; limiting idling of vehicles; and refueling vehicles at night to reduce gasoline vapors getting in the air and coming into contact with the sun to form ozone.

Maine DEP provides a variety of tools for the public and press to stay informed of the current levels and resulting impacts to human health. Daily air quality forecasts are available on the department's website at www.maine.gov/dep (click on "Today's Air

Quality Forecast”) and via a toll-free hotline which can be accessed by dialing (800) 223-1196.

Forecasts can also be accessed each day on the Maine DEP Air Bureau’s four Twitter accounts, one for each region where air quality alerts have been issued in recent years including midcoast (Twitter handle: meair_acadia), eastern interior (Twitter handle: meair_bangor), western interior (Twitter handle: meair_lewiston) and the southwest coast (Twitter handle: meair_portland).

People who are affected by poor air quality including asthmatics and those with heart conditions as well as those like sports coaches, elder care workers and nurses who are responsible for the welfare of people impacted by poor air quality are also urged to sign up at www.enviroflash.info for EnviroFlash, an automated, zip code based electronic alert system that warns when air quality is likely to be poor locally through text messages and email notifications.

In addition, the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention says that with southern and central parts of the state expecting very hot weather this weekend, members of the public should protect themselves from the heat especially when outdoors, exercising or being very active.

Many of the CDC’s recommendations on beating the heat are consistent with DEP’s recommendations for staying safe on air quality alert days and include drinking more fluids; resting often; spending time in air conditioned places; wearing lightweight clothing, a hat and sunscreen; and staying current on the weather forecasts by visiting www.weather.gov/gray or calling 688-3210.

More information from the CDC on staying healthy in the heat is available at www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/environmental-health/heat/.