

International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies | Earth 911

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The biggest problem with fossil fuels is their contribution to climate change, but their most immediate impact is air pollution. This year, the United Nations set aside today to reflect on and address air quality.

Air pollution causes an estimated [6.5 million](#) premature deaths each year. Air quality in America improved after the passage of the [Clean Air Act](#) in the 1970s. So Americans tend to think of air pollution as a “third-world problem.” Many foreign cities are cloaked in a thick layer of smog. But air pollution is [much worse](#) than we realize here in the U.S., too.

International Day of Clean Air

Last year, the United Nations [designated](#) September 7, 2020, as the first [International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies](#) to raise global awareness of the far-reaching impacts of air pollution. Through its virtual [BreatheLife](#) educational campaign, the UN encourages individuals and member states to reduce air pollution. They hope to significantly reduce the number of deaths from pollution by 2030.

The World Health Organization has established [Air Quality Guidelines](#) for worldwide use. Each country needs its own air quality standards based on local circumstances. But we all need to work toward a global standard because air pollution does not stay in place. Much of the ozone pollution on the United States' [West Coast](#) is generated in China; acid rain [in Canada](#) is largely the result of U.S. industry.

Climate and Health

Air pollution is the single greatest environmental risk to human health both [globally](#) and in [the U.S.](#) Nearly half of Americans live with unhealthy ozone or particle pollution, which is a significant [environmental justice](#) issue.

Fighting climate change and improving air quality are intrinsically linked, as fossil fuel use is the primary cause of [climate change](#) and the primary source of particulate air pollution. In fact, recent research confirms that air quality benefits would be enough to [justify the cost](#) of switching to renewable energy *even if climate change was not a factor*.

Without action, stroke, chronic respiratory disease, lung cancer, and heart attack deaths attributable to air pollution could increase by 50% by 2050 – leading to roughly [4.5 million premature deaths](#) in the U.S. alone.

Blue Sky Actions

To save lives and maintain blue skies, one of the most effective steps individual Americans can take is to reduce their [transportation footprint](#). That means driving less, never idling or “warming up” your engine, and driving the most fuel-efficient vehicle possible.

We can also avoid the use of highly polluting two-stroke engines in leaf blowers and other [gas-powered tools](#). Wood smoke is also a pollutant; we must respect burn bans and burn less wood at other times. Cigarettes are not a significant source of pollution by quantity, but they have an outsized health effect and contribute to [water pollution](#). [Aerosol sprays](#) and items that [emit VOCs](#) also release greenhouse gases.

The Clean Air Act [successfully reduced](#) pollution levels in the U.S., but the current administration has marked its 50th anniversary with repeated rollback attempts. Voters can learn about these challenges to existing legislation and [take action](#) to ensure elected representatives know that environmental regulations are environmental protections. We can also let them know we support the [Public Health Air Quality Act](#) introduced this year.

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