

spotlight

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OZONE IN THE CITY

NC Cities on Track for Third Straight Year of Few High-Ozone Days

SUMMARY: Despite record high temperatures during the month of July, North Carolina's metropolitan areas are experiencing a third straight year of relatively few high ozone days. Unfortunately good news doesn't sell and there are some "environmental advocates" in the state who seem intent on sounding the alarm bells regardless of the facts.

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Ground level ozone in North Carolina's metropolitan areas is bad and getting worse. Right? Wrong. In fact, despite record high temperatures in July, North Carolina's cities seem to be headed for a third straight year with relatively few high ozone days, defined by the EPA and North Carolina's Division of Air Quality as a day when any ozone monitor in a designated area registers a code orange or greater.¹ Ozone is formed when certain kinds of emissions from power plants, automobiles, and other sources, in particular nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), mix with heat and intense sunlight. While it is clear that this year's ozone levels will not be as low as they were in the summer of 2004, which had the fewest high ozone days on record for both the state and its metropolitan areas, this season does seem to be roughly on par with 2003, the year that set the previous record low. As of August 1, 2005, the average number of high ozone days per monitor in North Carolina's three major metropolitan areas was 2.2, and for this same period in 2003 it was 2.4.²

But for some people, good news is difficult to embrace. For example, Steve Weber, chair of the Mecklenburg County Air Quality Commission, laments that the good news of 2003 and 2004 "caused the community to lose focus on the regional air quality problem." He further points out that in 2002 Charlotte had 50 high ozone days, exclaiming that "we could reach that level this year."³ What he doesn't point out is in order for this to happen almost every day for the rest of the ozone season would have to be a code orange or greater. I wonder what kind of bet he would be willing to wager on that outcome.

David Farren from the Southern Environmental Law Center heaps on even

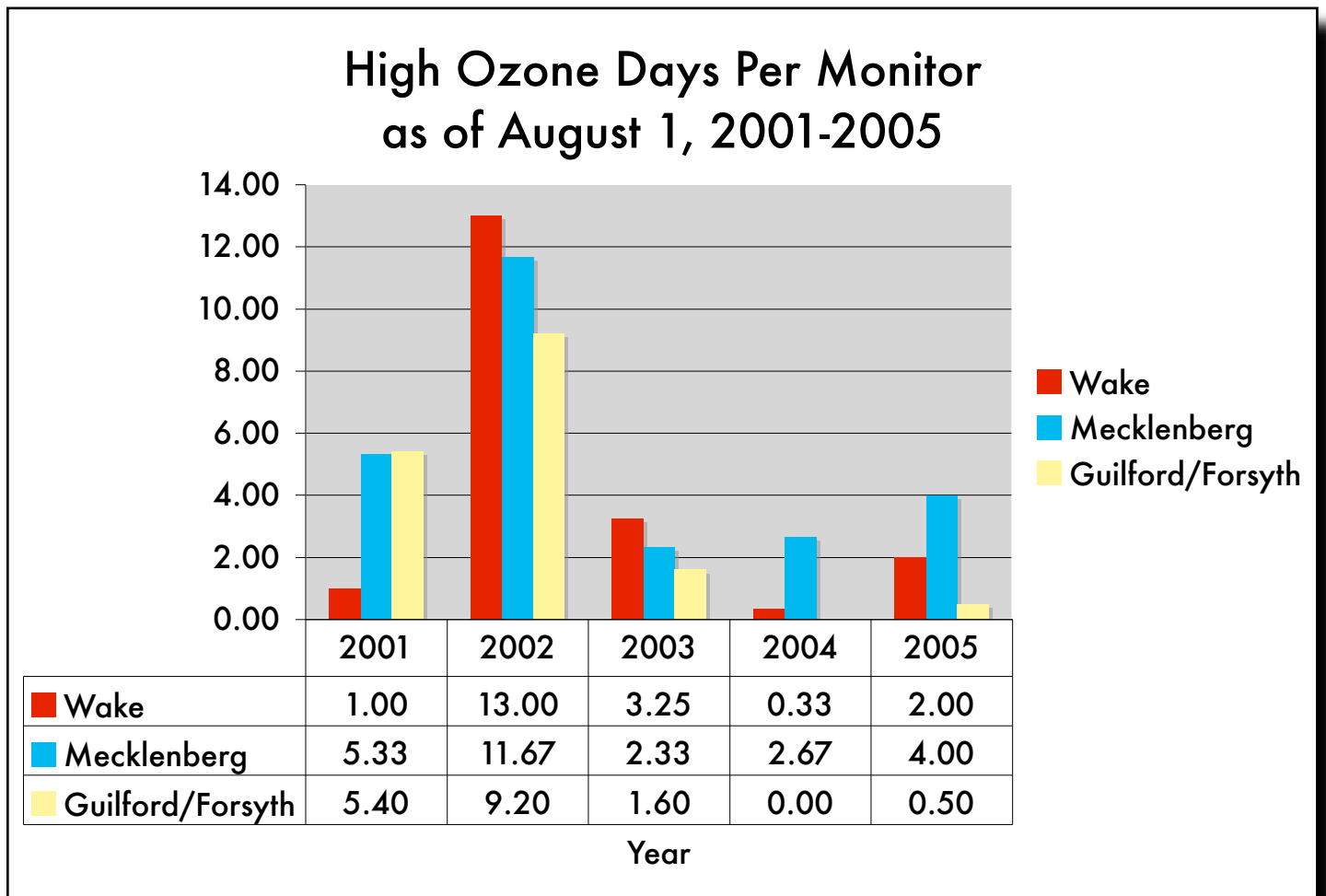
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more distortions. Writing in the June 27th *Triad Business Journal*, he states that “over the past few summers, about one day a week the air in the Triad was unfit to breath.”⁴ The fact is that in 2004 only a single high ozone day was registered in the Triad and that was on a monitor in Randolph County. None of the monitors in Guilford or Forsyth County had any high ozone days at all. In 2003 the average ozone monitor in the Triad registered slightly over two high ozone days for the entire season, with the highest monitor registering only four high ozone days. In other words, no population center in the Triad faced more than four high ozone days in 2003.

The Good News Continues

While this summer has had some of the hottest days on record, it also appears that the ozone season is headed for another soft landing. As of August 1, 2005, Wake County had registered only 2 high ozone days per monitor. This is above the number registered as of August 2004 but below the number registered for 2003. It should be noted that the city of Raleigh has had only 1 high ozone day so far this season. Mecklenburg County, which typically has the highest number in the state, has averaged only four high ozone days per monitor as of August 1. This was somewhat higher than the last two years but still well below the five year average of 5.2 for the county. Guilford and Forsyth Counties are showing the fewest number of high ozone days per monitor, registering less than 1 day as of August 1. This means that Greensboro/Winston-Salem is on track to have their second lowest ozone on record.



Conclusion

While some have argued that the reason 2003 and 2004 had very few high ozone days was that temperatures were relatively mild, this cannot be argued for 2005. North Carolina and its cities have recently gone through almost two weeks of high 90s plus temperatures yet a large number of high ozone days did not materialize. The fact is that ozone-

forming pollutants from all sources are declining and have been doing so for over 20 years. This is especially true of automobiles, which get cleaner by about 10 percent each year as older dirtier cars are replaced by newer, cleaner cars. On net, this translates into about a 6 percent reduction in auto pollution annually for North Carolina.

There is good news on the air pollution front. North Carolinians should celebrate, especially those who claim to have environmental protection as their biggest concern. But the fact is that these same people depend on scary news to sustain both their own livelihoods and the organizations they represent. In the political arena there is nothing more unsettling for professional advocates than the realization that the problem in which they have invested their capital is actually being solved.

-Roy Cordato is Vice President for Research and Resident Scholar at the John Locke Foundation

Notes

- 1 Technically this is when ozone reaches .085 parts per billion of ambient air in the atmosphere averaged over an 8-hour period.
- 2 All ozone data used in this Spotlight was obtained from data bases provided by the North Carolina Division of Air Quality. See <http://daq.state.nc.us/monitor/data/>.
- 3 Steve Weber, "Let's make it safe to breathe," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 5, 2005.
- 4 David Farren, "Triad Can't breathe clean air if its head's in the sand," *Triad Business Journal*, June 27, 2005.