



Keeping an Eye on our Air Northwest Territories Air Quality Report (Summary)

Environmental Protection Division

2006



INTRODUCTION

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) watches for changes in air quality. ENR monitoring stations located throughout the Northwest Territories (NWT) have highly specialized instruments to collect and measure dust and gases that are in the air. This information is sent electronically to the ENR office in Yellowknife. The public, environmental consultants and other interested people can find this information at our website on the Internet at <http://lisin.rwed-hq.gov.nt.ca/NWTAQ/NetworkSummary.aspx>.

Outside air surrounding us on the land and in our communities, is called “ambient” air. It contains nitrogen, oxygen, a small amount of carbon dioxide and water vapour. It also has traces of dust and other chemicals in it. There are standards that describe the maximum amount of dust and chemicals that can be in ambient air. The naturally occurring levels of dust and chemicals in the air are called “background levels”. Human activities and unusual natural events such as forest fires can raise these background levels and cause pollution.

By monitoring the levels of dust and chemicals in the air, we can report pollution when it happens. Last year we saw a spike in our charts during forest fire season. Smoke from fires burning in Alaska caused fine dust pollution at all of the NWT stations. This year there was hardly any pollution from forest fires.

We also watch for trends over the years. One change we have seen has been in Yellowknife. When the local gold mines were operating, arsenic and sulphur dioxide polluted Yellowknife’s air, but since the mines have closed that air pollution has largely disappeared.

OUR NETWORK

Environment and Natural Resources' permanent monitoring stations are located in

- Yellowknife
- Inuvik
- Norman Wells
- Fort Liard

They are small trailers that hold equipment that is always collecting and measuring dust and chemicals in the air. In these four communities we watch for the following substances:

- Fine-particle 'dust' (PM_{2.5})
- Sulphur dioxide (SO₂)
- Nitrogen oxides (NO_x)

Also, testing is done for the following substances at selected stations:

- Hydrogen sulphide (H₂S)
- Ground-level ozone (O₃)
- Carbon monoxide (CO)
- Coarse-particle 'dust' (PM₁₀)
- Total Suspended Particulate (TSP – 'dust')
- PM_{2.5} at Daring Lake (in the summer)
- Acidic Deposition at Snare Rapids

We determine the significance of measured levels by comparing them to the *NWT Ambient Air Quality Standards* adopted under the *NWT Environmental Protection Act*. In some cases, standards have not been developed for the NWT and so we use limits set by the federal and provincial governments.

We also work with Canada-wide air quality networks:

- The Yellowknife station is part of the National Air Pollution Surveillance Network (NAPS). NAPS tests air quality in cities throughout Canada.
- Rainwater and snow sampled at Snare Rapids is part of the Canadian Air and Precipitation Monitoring Network (CAPMoN).



HIGHLIGHTS IN 2006

Throughout the NWT we continue to enjoy clean air with very little pollution. The dust and chemicals we find in the air are usually well below the amounts allowed by our standards.

The main causes of pollution are forest fires and springtime dust. Fine 'dust' (PM_{2.5}) levels in 2006 were very low because there were no major forest fire events as compared to last year. There was only one PM_{2.5} reading above our standards. Other readings show us the effects on air quality from burning petroleum for heating and in our vehicles during the cold days of winter.

Yellowknife

Yellowknife air quality continued to improve from previous years.

- In 2006, the annual average for TSP or 'dust' in Yellowknife was the lowest ever recorded. This is also the first year that there were no daily TSP readings above our standard.
- Forest fire smoke from Wood Buffalo, measured as fine 'dust' (PM_{2.5}), polluted the air in Yellowknife in June.
- A continuous coarse-particle (PM₁₀) monitor was installed in April 2006.

Fort Liard

Fort Liard air quality remains excellent. The natural gas developments in the area are not presently affecting the air quality in the community.

Norman Wells

Norman Wells air quality remains excellent. Industry is not presently affecting the air quality in the community.

Inuvik

Air quality in Inuvik remains excellent. Our monitoring shows that there are no chemicals in the air that are higher than acceptable standards.

- A continuous coarse-particle (PM₁₀) monitor was installed in October 2006.



THE POLLUTANTS WE MONITOR AND THE PROBLEMS THEY CAN CAUSE

Our job is to watch for pollution and we do that by monitoring dust and gaseous substances.

Dust comes in different particle sizes. Dust of all sizes is called Total Suspended Particulate (TSP) and dust that is about 30 times smaller than the width of a human hair is called PM_{2.5}. High levels of PM_{2.5} can cause health problems because the particles are so small that they get through our nose and throat defences and get deep into our lungs. PM₁₀ particles are slightly larger than PM_{2.5} particles but are still inhalable and therefore, they also cause health concerns.

We monitor the following gaseous substances:

Sulphur Dioxide: SO₂ can come from forest fires, building heating, power generating plants, gas plant flares and oil refineries. High levels can cause lung problems, especially for people with asthma. SO₂ can affect plants, especially lichens, and lead to the formation of other pollutants.

Nitrogen Oxide: The sources of NO_x are the same as SO_2 , as well as vehicle emissions. High levels can cause serious breathing problems that can be ongoing. NO_x can also lead to formation of other pollutants.

Hydrogen Sulphide: H_2S smells like rotten eggs and can come from oil and gas activities, sewage treatment plants, as well as from natural sources such as swamps. High levels can cause eye irritation and stomach sickness.

Ground-level Ozone: This is the same gas (O_3) that is found higher up in the atmosphere where it is called stratospheric ozone. High in the atmosphere, O_3 is a good thing – it protects the planet from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. However, at ground level, O_3 can be harmful to humans and plants. High levels can be created in the lower atmosphere by sunlight and heat causing chemical reactions with other gases (NO_x and substances called volatile organic compounds or VOC's). High levels can lead to chest tightness, coughing, wheezing and other heart and lung problems. The effect of O_3 on plants can be seen as discoloured leaves and general poor vegetation growth.

Carbon Monoxide: CO comes from a number of sources including home heating, vehicle exhaust and forest fires. Extremely high levels of CO in our air can be poisonous and can cause headaches, shortness of breath, and stomach sickness.

EQUIPMENT AND QUALITY CONTROL

Our Air Quality Monitoring Network uses a variety of monitoring equipment to collect information on pollutants. To test gaseous substances in the air, analyzers are constantly vacuuming air in, measuring chemical content and providing “real time” data.



Analyzers



Hi-Vol

There are two methods of testing for dust. To test for TSP, a vacuum pump sucks the air in and filters catch the dust. Samples are collected by a machine called a High Volume Air Sampler (Hi-Vol) and sent to a laboratory for testing.



BAM Head

To test PM_{2.5} and even smaller particles, samples are taken continuously by a machine called the Beta-Attenuation Mass Monitor (BAM).

ENR uses a number of methods to ensure they have correct, scientifically valid information. ENR follows Environment Canada guidelines and installs and operates equipment according to manufacturers' recommendations and maintenance plans. Analyzers are self-calibrating and our technologists also check measurements on a daily basis.

ENR stations also track wind speed, wind direction and temperature.



NEED MORE INFORMATION?

After reading this summary, if you would like to find out more about air quality you can find the NWT Air Quality Report for 2006 on the Internet at:

www.enr.gov.nt.ca/eps/environ.htm or check out ENR's new air quality website at:

<http://lisin.rwed-hq.gov.nt.ca/NWTAQ/NetworkSummary.aspx>.

You can also contact our Environmental Protection Division

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