

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 22, 2026

The Honorable Lee Zeldin
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Administrator Zeldin:

We write to request an update on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s progress towards meeting the upcoming deadline to issue area designations for the 2024 fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) national ambient air quality standard (NAAQS). The Clean Air Act requires EPA to issue area designations within two years of setting a new standard or revising an existing standard. EPA issued the revised 2024 PM_{2.5} standard on February 7, 2024, and the deadline to issue designations is Friday, February 6, 2026.¹

Recent reporting indicates that EPA may not meet this deadline.² Finalizing these designations is critical because they represent EPA's legal determination of whether areas have clean or polluted air—whether families, children, and workers across the United States are breathing in dangerous levels of toxic pollutants. PM_{2.5} pollution is dangerous to human health, particularly for vulnerable populations, including children, seniors, pregnant people, and those in low-income and historically overburdened communities.³ It causes serious health harms, including cancers, chronic illnesses, heart attacks, and even death.⁴

Over 75 million people live in a county with PM_{2.5} pollution levels that do not comply with the 2024 standard, meaning that those tens of millions of people breathe air that EPA has deemed harmful to human health.⁵ And, consistent with numerous scientific studies, the demographics of the over 75 million people in polluted counties disproportionately consists of people of color.⁶ Notably, although EPA has recently sought to backtrack on some legal issues pertaining to the 2024 standard, it has not retreated from its conclusion that the 2024 standard is rooted in strong scientific evidence.

¹ 42 U.S.C. §7407.

² InsideEPA, *Awaiting Vacatur Decision, EPA Faces Looming PM Attainment Designations* (Dec. 11, 2025), <https://insideepa.com/daily-news/awaiting-vacatur-decision-epa-faces-looming-pm-attainment-designations>.

³ American Lung Association, "Health Impact of Air Pollution" <https://www.lung.org/research/sota/health-risks>.

⁴ Planet Detroit, *How soot pollution causes heart attacks, cancer, dementia, premature deaths* (February 8, 2024), <https://planetdetroit.org/2024/02/how-soot-pollution-causes-heart-attacks-cancer-dementia-premature-deaths/>.

⁵ Earthjustice, *Assessing 2024 PM_{2.5} Standard Implementation So Far: Who's on Track to Get Clean Air and Who's Left Behind* (Dec. 2025), https://earthjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/ej_pm2.5whitepaper.pdf.

⁶ Tessum, C. W., Paolella, D. A., Chambliss, S. E., Apte, J. S., Hill, J. D., & Marshall, J. D. (2021). [*PM_{2.5} polluters disproportionately and systemically affect people of color in the United States*](#). *Science Advances*, 7(18), eabf4491.

Air pollution affects our health, workforce, and economic productivity. Millions of workdays are lost each year due to air pollution, and millions of children miss school due to unhealthy air.⁷ Research shows that breathing unhealthy air negatively affects a student's development and academic success, and in the longer term, impacts their employment and earnings.⁸ Air pollution takes an immense health and financial toll on this country, with one report showing health costs exceeding \$800 billion per year and rising.⁹

The area designations are key to ensuring that all people in the country can breathe clean air. EPA issuing the designations initiates the time-tested, commonsense process laid out in the Clean Air Act to clean up the air quality in those areas deemed legally unhealthy. To meet the February 6, 2026, designations deadline, EPA would have had to make any notifications (typically called "120-day letters") by October 9, 2025.¹⁰ October 9, 2025, came and went, and as we understand, EPA has not sent any 120-day letters.

We are concerned about EPA's apparent lack of progress towards the February 6th deadline. To address our concerns about whether EPA is faithfully carrying out its legal responsibilities to protect public health by implementing the 2024 PM_{2.5} standard, we request that, by January 30, 2026, you update us on the status of and the anticipated timeline for completing the designations process, specifically including the following:

1. Whether all states have now submitted designations; if so, please share any that have not previously been publicly released; if not, please identify those that did not.
2. The number of exceptional event demonstrations that EPA received that are relevant to the designations process under the 2024 PM_{2.5} standard; the number of such exceptional event demonstrations that EPA has determined require a response from EPA; and of the exceptional event demonstrations that EPA determined require an EPA response, the number of such demonstrations that EPA has reached a conclusion on.
3. Any communications EPA has had with state officials about its process for and progress toward issuing final designations.
4. Whether EPA intends or expects to send any 120-day letters to any states, and, if so, its anticipated timeline for doing so.

⁷ American Lung Association, *Asthma Trends and Burden*"

<https://www.lung.org/research/trends-in-lung-disease/asthma-trends-brief/trends-and-burden>.

⁸ *Id.*; WVU Today, "*WVU research on school absences links dirty air to empty desks*" (August 12, 2025), <https://wvutoday.wvu.edu/stories/2025/08/12/wvu-research-on-school-absences-links-dirty-air-to-empty-desks>; Inside Climate News, "*Air Pollution Is 'Keeping Kids Out of School' in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, Study Shows*" (June 18, 2025), <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/18062025/clairton-coke-works-air-pollution-children-asthma/>.

⁹ NRDC, "The Costs of Inaction: The Economic Burden of Fossil Fuels and Climate Change on Health in the United States" <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/costs-inaction-burden-health-report.pdf>.

¹⁰ U.S. EPA Memorandum on Initial Area Designations for the 2024 Revised Primary Annual Fine Particle National Ambient Air Quality Standard (Feb. 7, 2024), [pm-naaqs-designations-memo_2.7.2024_-jg-signed.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/air-quality/pm-naaqs-designations-memo_2.7.2024_-jg-signed.pdf).

5. Whether EPA intends to provide a public comment period on the designations, as it has historically done.
6. The number of staff in the Office of State Air Partnerships and in each Regional Office, all broken out separately, who are working on completing the designations under the 2024 PM_{2.5} standard.
7. EPA's anticipated timeline for completing the designations process under the 2024 PM_{2.5} standard.

We look forward to receiving your prompt and detailed response.

Sincerely,



Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



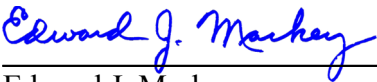
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