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Environment Department Alerts Doña Ana County Residents About Risks Associated with Dust Storms

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department, along with the City of Las Cruces and Doña Ana County, is advising county citizens of potential risks associated with dust storms.

Although dust storms are common in this area of New Mexico and are inherent to arid climates generally, inhaling dust can cause a number of serious health problems and can make some health problems worse. Inhaled dust can irritate the lungs and trigger allergic reactions, as well as asthma attacks. For people who already suffer from these conditions, dust can cause serious breathing problems. Dust can also cause coughing, wheezing and runny noses. Breathing large amounts of dust for prolonged periods can result in chronic breathing and lung problems.

A combination of weather conditions, features of the natural environment, and human activity can contribute to high levels of wind-blown dust, or dust storms. High winds can raise large amounts of dust from areas of dry, loose, exposed soil. In the Doña Ana County, high winds are most common during the spring. Doña Ana County typically experiences one to 10 days a year when dust storms result in exceedances of the National Ambient Air Quality Standard for airborne particulate matter 10 microns or less in size, which is about 1/7 the diameter of a human hair. This standard was developed to protect the public's health and well being.

The best precaution to take during a dust storm is simply to avoid going outside. If you must go outside, spend as little time outside as possible, avoid hard exercise and wear some type of covering over the nose and mouth to provide protection from larger dust particles.

Breathing too much dust can potentially harm anyone. However, the following groups run the highest risk of suffering adverse affects from a dust storm: Infants, children, teens and the elderly; people with respiratory conditions like asthma, bronchitis and emphysema; people with heart disease; and pregnant women.

For more information on the risks associated with dust storms please see the NMED's Web site at www.nmenv.state.nm.us or contact the NMED at 1-800-224-7009. For more information, please contact Thomas Ruiz, Environmental Analyst, NMED Air Quality Bureau, at (505) 647-7976, or Adam Rankin, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314.

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