



BILL RICHARDSON
GOVERNOR

State of New Mexico
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT
Office of the Secretary
Harold Runnels Building
1190 St. Francis Drive, P.O. Box 26110
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502-6110
Telephone (505) 827-2855



RON CURRY
SECRETARY
JON GOLDSTEIN
DEPUTY SECRETARY

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Contact: Marissa Stone, NMED Communications Director
Telephone: (505) 827-0314 or (505) 231-0475

Environment Department Warns Residents of Risks Created by Dust Storms

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department is advising residents of risks associated with dust storms common in parts of the state.

Inhaling dust can cause respiratory and lung problems including coughing, wheezing and runny noses and it can also worsen existing medical conditions such as asthma.

“Residents should avoid being outside for long periods of time during dust storms,” said Environmental Protection Division Director Jim Norton. “Dust can irritate the lungs and trigger allergic reactions – we want New Mexico citizens to be aware of those problems so they can avoid becoming sick.”

The best precaution residents can take during a dust storm is to avoid going outside. Those who must go outside should avoid spending long periods of time there, avoid vigorous exercise and cover the nose and mouth to protect themselves from dust particles.

Dust storms can occur up to 10 times a year in parts of the state – particularly in southern New Mexico. Those storms can cause exceedances of the National Ambient Air Quality Standard for airborne particulate matter. That standard is exceeded when 150 micrograms of particles about one-seventh the diameter of a human hair go through an air monitor in a day. The smaller the particles of dust, the greater chance there is that it will negatively affect human health when it reaches the lungs.

A combination of weather conditions, the natural environment, and human activity can contribute to high levels of wind blown dust. High winds can dislodge dust from dry, exposed soil. In New Mexico, high winds and dust storms are most common during the spring season.

Breathing too much dust can potentially harm anyone. However, the following people run the highest risk of being adversely affected by a dust storm:

- Infants, children, and teens,
- 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 New Mexico Environment Department's Web site at www.nmenv.state.nm.us or contact the Environment Department at 1-800-224-7009.

For more information, call Thomas Ruiz, Environmental Analyst, New Mexico Environment Department, Air Quality Bureau at (575) 647-7976, or Marissa Stone, Communications Director, New Mexico Environment Department at (505) 827-0314.

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