NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS for AIR QUALITY: Frequently Asked Questions

What is a National Environmental Standard?

National Environmental Standards are regulations issued under the Resource Management Act by central government that prescribe technical standards, methods or requirements for environmental matters. They apply nationally, meaning that each local council must enforce the same standard (although they can impose stricter standards when local conditions permit). National Environmental Standards may cover things such as:

- Water quality, level or flow;
- Air quality;
- Soil contaminant levels;
- Noise;
- Monitoring requirements.

How are National Environmental Standards enacted by councils?

National Environment Standards automatically apply to local councils, who implement them when making resource consent decisions and through local planning documents. Some Standards apply immediately, whereas others have transitional periods giving local councils the opportunity to comply by a certain date.

What are the benefits of National Environmental Standards?

- They protect public health and the environment by providing an environmental "bottom-line" under which councils cannot go.
- They provide greater certainty for industry by setting a "level-playing field" across councils that clarifies environmental expectations to guide resource consent applications and decision making.
- They can express the national interest by providing clear direction to all local councils about the required national standards.
- They demonstrate how New Zealand is meeting its international obligations (eg, the Stockholm Convention, which is a United Nations environmental treaty on toxic chemicals. The objective of the treaty is to protect human health and the environment from persistent organic pollutants.)

How many other National Environmental Standards have been issued?

None. The 14 standards for air quality announced today are the first ever issued under the Resource Management Act, which was passed in 1991. Since 1994 local authorities have been operating under air quality guidelines, updated by the government in 2002, and these guidelines have now been converted into National Environmental Standards.

Why has the government introduced these 14 National Environmental Standards for air quality?

For two reasons:

1. First of all, clean air is essential for the health of both the public and the environment.
2. Secondly, National Environmental Standards are a key tool in making the Resource Management Act work. Local government and industry called on the Ministry for the Environment to promote national consistency and certainty in resource management. The Environment Minister has responded and the government considers National Environmental Standards the best tool to achieve this.

The Standards will become law by regulation, supporting the visibility and effectiveness of environmental legislation in New Zealand.

Is New Zealand's air quality so poor that we need these Standards?
Yes and no. On the whole, New Zealand has relatively good air quality due to low population density, close proximity to the sea, and remoteness from other continents and sources of pollution. But, based on monitoring data to date, we know there are 28 urban centres that are currently above the acceptable levels of air pollution, in particular fine particles (ie. the 28 locations exceed this standard). There are likely to be many more. This is largely due to home heating emissions, except in Auckland where vehicles are a major source of air pollution.

What are the costs and benefits of these air quality standards?
These standards are expected to improve air quality, saving 625 lives between now and 2020. The financial benefit over that time is expected to be around $318 million, and the total cost around $110 million.

The majority of the costs will fall on district, city and regional councils, each of which will shoulder between $50,000-$200,000 per year to implement these standards. Of course local authorities already spend money on monitoring and improving air quality within their regions, so this is not a new cost to them.

What do these 14 standards cover?

- Seven standards are for dioxins and toxics – banning certain activities that emit hazardous pollutants to air, eg. open burning of tyres.
- Five standards are for ambient (outdoor) air quality – to keep the air outdoors clean and safe. The standards deal with the following pollutants: particles smaller than ten micron (PM10), sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and ozone.
- One standard is for the design of new home wood burners in urban areas to minimise harmful emissions to air.
- One standard requires landfills (over one million tonnes) to collect and destroy landfill gas – to help reduce greenhouse gases.

What is the standard for dioxins and other toxics?
From October 2004, these activities emitting hazardous pollutants will be banned:

- burning of tyres in the open
- bitumen burning for road maintenance
- burning of coated wire in the open
- burning of oil in the open
- landfill fires
- new high temperature hazardous waste incinerators.

Will this affect school and hospital incinerators?
Yes. All school and hospital incinerators will be banned unless they obtain a resource consent by October 2006. This is because these incinerators are located close to people considered sensitive to air pollution (ie. children and sick people). As there are alternatives for dealing with this waste, such as recycling, land-filling and other forms of treatment, the Ministry for the Environment expects most schools and hospitals to take-up these alternatives rather than bothering to gain a resource consent to keep their incinerators going.

What about hazardous waste incinerators?
New hazardous waste incinerators will be banned. There are currently three existing facilities at Auckland Airport, New Plymouth (Dow-Agro Sciences) and near Christchurch Airport, which will be permitted to continue operation with resource consent. These are important for dealing with certain waste streams, such as biosecurity hazards. The incinerator at Auckland Airport burns a lot of this waste.

Who is responsible for enforcing the standards? How will they be enforced?
As with all National Environmental Standards, local government is responsible for implementing and enforcing these Standards.
Regional councils are responsible for managing air quality in their regions. The ambient standards for air do not specify how they should be achieved and are outcome based. For example, councils may look at programmes to encourage cleaner heating sources if it is an issue in their areas.

From when do these Standards apply?
From 1 October 2005, regional councils must monitor air quality and publicly report whether the air in their regions is within or exceeds the standards. Regional councils with air pollution that exceeds the standards are expected to make a plan for improvement, showing the path to compliance by 2013.

When deciding resource consents, councils must consider the net result of all activities in their regions and how they affect air quality. After 2013, councils will not be able to grant new discharge consents for emission of fine particles to air in areas that exceed the standard.

Will these standards restrict new development or industry?
This is unlikely, as the major source of air pollution in most urban centres is domestic heating. Regional councils will need to manage the air quality in their

regions and focus mitigation on domestic heating, and therefore not unfairly restricting new industry. Nonetheless, new industry will need to be using clean technology and existing industries may need to look at upgrading to cleaner technology when they re-apply for their resource consents.

In Auckland, where vehicles emissions are a major source of pollution, the work underway to improve fuel efficiency and cleanliness will make a big difference. From 2013, resource consents won't be granted if they make pollution worse (ie. for the discharge of fine particles to air if that area is already polluted).

What is the wood burner standard?

Any freestanding wood burner installed on or after September 2005, must meet an emission limit of 1.5 grams of fine particles per kilogram of wood burnt, and a thermal efficiency rating of 65 percent. Any in-built unit must meet the same emission limit and a thermal efficiency rating of 62 percent.

The above design standard will apply to new wood burners in urban areas from September 2005. A list of compliant wood burners will be available on the Ministry for the Environment website www.mfe.govt.nz and distributed to all retail outlets.

What about pollution from home heating?

This year's Budget provided $700,000 for the Ministry for the Environment to lead a project investigating how more families can be encouraged to make home energy efficiency improvements and install cleaner heating sources.

The Ministry will gather information from other countries dealing with the same problem, commission new research, and develop a national policy on the issue. While the project is still in its early stages, it could potentially include a national incentive scheme to encourage households to choose low emission heating.

What other National Environmental Standards are under consideration?

The Government is proposing a National Environmental Standard for raw drinking water sources. The Ministry for the Environment is running technical workshops on this proposed standard in August and public submissions will be called for later in the year.

The Ministry for the Environment is also discussing with local government the form of a possible standard for the application of biosolids onto land. Discussions are still at an early stage, so public notification of this standard is not expected for some time.