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Air Quality Forecasting Changes in Huntsville and Decatur

MONTGOMERY – The Alabama Department of Environmental Management has issued air quality forecasts for the Huntsville/Decatur area for over 8 years. These forecasts are designed to help the Huntsville/Decatur area achieve and maintain compliance with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for ozone and particulate matter and also to allow citizens to make informed decisions about their daily outdoor activities.

Major changes have been made to the forecasts this year due to the Environmental Protection Agency's recent actions to tighten the NAAQS for ground-level ozone. On March 12, EPA began implementing a more stringent standard for ground-level ozone based on new scientific evidence about ozone and its effects on public health and the environment. Specifically, EPA revised the 8 hour ozone standard from 84 parts per billion to 75 parts per billion. Additionally, EPA revised the breakpoints of ozone levels which represent specific health effects. These breakpoints form the Air Quality Index and are the basis for ADEM's air quality forecasts.

As a result, ADEM will incorporate the new standard into the forecasts beginning May 1. The more stringent ozone standard could result in more Alert Days, which are days where air quality is expected to be unhealthy. Information on the new ozone standard can be obtained at www.epa.gov/groundlevelozone.

"Protecting air quality in Alabama is part of the fundamental mission of ADEM," said ADEM Director Trey Glenn. "The new ozone standard only reinforces the Department's commitment to reducing air pollution and implementing the regulations that protect Alabamians and the environment."

ADEM prepares the forecasts by evaluating real time air quality data provided by the City of Huntsville's Division of Natural Resources & Environmental Management and the ADEM Field Operations Division and by assessing weather patterns, computer models, and observed climate trends. Forecasts will be issued Sunday through Friday to provide a prediction of the air quality levels for the following day. The forecasts issued on Friday will cover the following two or three days. Also, the daily forecasts consist of color-coded categories that reflect expected air quality levels and recommend actions for the general public. Forecasts are provided to the local news media and are also available at adem.alabama.gov.

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(ADD ONE)

Air quality “Alerts” will be issued when conditions favor the development of air pollutants that equal or exceed the national standards. Alerts inform the public about recommended changes in daily activities to help reduce health complications. The alerts are especially helpful to sensitive groups such as young children, the elderly, or individuals with respiratory problems.

ADEM encourages voluntary efforts to reduce air pollution and offers information to help reduce concentrations of ground-level ozone and particulate matter. These voluntary efforts include operating outdoor power equipment less frequently, converting to compact fluorescent lights, and using energy-efficient appliances.

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