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Let's Clear the Air

By BOB HERBERT

Take a deep breath.

On second thought, don't.

You don't want to risk inhaling too much of that oppressive soup of pollutants that is passing for air in the New York metropolitan region. To say that it's ugly out there is an understatement. Breathing has become problematic. As the mercury streaks through the 90's each afternoon, that harsh, sooty, brownish stuff they call air just sits there, ominously, a caustic haze that sears the eyes and imposes a vague feeling of nausea on those who have to be out and about.

An ozone health advisory has been in effect, which means the air is unhealthy for active children and adults, and for people with respiratory diseases, such as asthma and chronic obstructive lung disease.

For once, the couch potatoes had the right idea: Crank up the air-conditioning and pop in that video. The American Lung Association made it clear that a lengthy jog or a furious game of tennis or an extended burst of Rollerblading was not advisable.

Conditions have been ideal over the past few days for a buildup of dangerous pollutants like ozone, carbon monoxide and particulate matter. Temperatures have been high and wind speeds low. And the endless, slowly moving traffic has offered up its relentless contribution of poisonous emissions.

After awhile it becomes too much even for healthy people.

"People who are out exercising, and breathing deeply as a result, are drawing all of this stuff into their lungs," said John Kirkwood, the chief executive officer of the American Lung Association.

"They're exercising to improve their health," he said during an interview Tuesday, when the temperature reached 99. "But if they're doing it on a day like today, it's actually adverse to their health."

Children, in particular, can be at risk. "They're more vulnerable because their respiratory systems are not fully formed," said Mr. Kirkwood. Studies have shown that as ozone levels increase, healthy youngsters engaged in normal levels of playground or camp activity can experience breathing problems.

So here's the good news. We know that the air is frequently lousy. And we know that the long-term problem of global warming is already upon us. But as bad as these problems are, they are not yet emergencies.

So what we have here is an opportunity. If we could somehow marshal the resources and the

will to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, we could both attack the looming problem of global warming, which may be the biggest problem to face the planet in the 21st century, and combat the debilitating air pollution that damages our health day in and day out.

Attack one and you automatically attack the other. If we could significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions — think traffic, think power plants — we would make an enormous contribution to the easing of global warming. And, as Michael Oppenheimer, the chief scientist at Environmental Defense, noted, "If you reduced carbon dioxide, you'd begin to get rid of most of the stuff that causes these everyday respiratory problems. You'd start to get rid of the nitrogen oxides, which lead to the generation of smog. You'd start to get rid of sulfur dioxide, which leads not only to acid rain but to the tiny particles that people breathe, and which cause respiratory and cardiovascular problems."

And so on.

California may be showing us the way. Faced with an awesome energy — and potential economic — crisis just a few months ago, Californians have been conserving like crazy. Government leaders have helped by establishing policies that offer incentives to conserve. And while the California problem is complex, there is little doubt that conservation has been a key factor in easing the crisis.

The trick for the rest of us — and that includes government leaders — is to figure out how to respond to problems like air pollution and global warming before a crisis threatens to consume us.

"Why does it take the threat of a crisis to get this done?" asked Dr. Oppenheimer.

We should act now. We need greater fuel efficiency in our motor vehicles. We need cleaner electric power plants. We need more efficient appliances in our homes.

And a dollop of enlightened leadership from our public officials.

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