

# Air Quality Concerns About Hurricane Helene



Air quality is impacted by major events like hurricanes, below is some additional information to consider.

## **Air Quality Index and Additional Temporary Monitors**

Asheville-Buncombe Air Quality Agency (AB Air Quality) monitors air quality that is reported in the Air Quality Index by EPA and in the weather forecasts. The Air Quality Index is generated from data collected at monitoring sites throughout Western North Carolina. It is reporting air quality for two pollutants, ground level ozone and fine particulates. Fine particulate pollution could be affected by smoke from open burning of storm debris or dust from storm damage. The Buncombe County fine particulate monitor is located at the Board of Education in Emma. The Air Quality Index is meant to give an indication of air quality conditions for a general area and does not give specific information on a smaller scale and may not be representative of the air quality in Swannanoa or Fairview for example.

AB Air Quality is working with North Carolina Division of Air Quality (NCDAQ) as they are exploring options to deploy temporary supplemental air quality monitoring in WNC in areas that may be experiencing more pollution due to Helene. There are also a few low-cost Purple Air fine particulate sensors that are located in Asheville and that data along with the regulatory monitoring data used for the AQI is available on the [EPA's AirNow fire and smoke map](#). The low cost sensor data is accessible to residents and a good source of additional information about our air quality conditions in areas where we don't have regulatory monitors.

## **Fine Particles and Dust**

AB Air Quality is aware that there is dust in the air from the flood waters that have receded and are also concerned about particles in the air from open burning of storm debris. Dust can contain fine particulate, but also contains particulate matter that is larger than what these monitors measure. Those larger particles are considered less dangerous to human health but can still cause irritation to lungs and upper respiratory systems. Dust is much easier to recognize since it is visible, and precautions can be made as described in the sections below including indoor air and general guidance. Current air quality monitoring does not determine what constituents are in the dust.

## **Indoor Air – Home Clean Up**

AB Air Quality recommends wearing a N95 dust mask when cleaning up storm debris and cleaning out homes that have been affected by flooding. We are also recommending that municipalities use water trucks to minimize dust on roads. The Swannanoa Community Care Station has a supply of N95 masks that are available to residents in the area. More information on precautions you can take related to flooding including mold, asbestos, lead, and other concerns are available from EPA at <https://www.epa.gov/flooded-homes>.

## **Residential Open Burning:**

The Buncombe County, City of Asheville, and other municipalities are providing storm debris pick up for residents. Asheville-Buncombe Air Quality Agency is encouraging residents to not burn the material and allowing the material to be picked up and disposed of with the collection services offered. The Agency would like to remind residents that the burning of leaves, brush, and yard trimmings is permitted on burning days between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., however the burning of household trash, building materials, asphaltic materials, cardboard, processed wood, and papers is prohibited at any time. To find out if it is a burning day,

please call **828-250-6767** or go to [www.abairquality.org](http://www.abairquality.org). Burning is not allowed in the City of Asheville or any of the other municipalities in Buncombe County.

### **Other Open Burning**

For storm debris that is being gathered with the intention of conducting open burning including the use of air curtain burners or open burning of storm debris by a business or other commercial or government entity, permission is required by the Asheville-Buncombe Air Quality Agency and there are certain requirements that must be met. Please contact the Agency at **828-250-6777** or at [airquality@buncombecounty.org](mailto:airquality@buncombecounty.org). Further details about these requirements can be found at [abairquality.org](http://abairquality.org). Under no circumstances should anyone burn synthetic materials or trash.

### **Demolition and Asbestos Removal**

A permit must be obtained from AB Air Quality for any plan to demolish or remodel any building in Buncombe County including residential, commercial, industrial or public buildings; or for any plan to remove any asbestos-containing material. Some projects are subject to the National Emissions Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants for Asbestos and have additional requirements. To see if a project is subject to this regulation, please read [AB Air Quality's Asbestos NESHAP Program Brochure](#). A permit can be obtained online by registering with the [Buncombe County Permits Portal](#) and clicking the Air Quality tab to start the application. Fees related to permits needed for demolition and asbestos removal caused by Hurricane Helene are being waived. Below are some resources for asbestos information:

[Homeowner and Renter's Guide to Asbestos Clean Up after Disasters](#)

[Homeowners and Asbestos](#)

[Asheville-Buncombe Air Quality Asbestos Page](#)

[North Carolina Health Hazards Control Unit – Asbestos Hazard Management](#)

### **General Guidance**

- If it looks or smells dusty or smoky outside, it's probably not a good time to work in the yard, go for a run, or for kids to play outdoors.
- If you see or smell smoke present, you should:
  - Check Your Current Air Quality at [DAQ NC Ambient Information Reporter](#) or [EPA AirNow](#). The EPA Air Now site has a fire and smoke map with data from low-cost Purple Air sensors that also monitor particulate matter at more locations in our area (<https://fire.airnow.gov>).
  - Air Quality Index and activity guide for fine particles is on the EPA AirNow site under AQI and Health. <https://document.airnow.gov/air-quality-guide-for-particle-pollution.pdf>
  - Subscribe to Air Quality Forecasting at [www.enviroflash.info](http://www.enviroflash.info)
  - Learn how to make a [DIY air cleaner](#) and about [air cleaners and filters in the home](#).