

China News

Heavy Smog Lingers in Northern China

Haze Closes Schools, Airports and Roads

By Wayne Ma Updated Oct. 22, 2013 8:19 p.m. ET



Buildings and streets are seen under heavy smog in Harbin Tuesday. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

BEIJING—Much of northeastern China remained shrouded in heavy smog on Tuesday, forcing the closure of roads, schools and a major airport for a second day, and adding to public pressure on Chinese officials to address mounting concerns over air pollution.

Much of northeastern China has been shrouded in heavy smog, forcing the closure of roads, schools and a major airport, and adding to public pressure on Chinese officials to address mounting concerns over air pollution.

China's official Xinhua news agency said Tuesday that all expressways in northeastern Heilongjiang province remained closed due to poor visibility. Classes at primary and middle schools in the northeastern city of Harbin also remained suspended as a health precaution, it said. In some downtown areas of Harbin—known for its bitterly cold winters, ice sculptures and strong Russian influence due to its proximity to the Russian border—visibility was less than 20 meters, it added.

Coal burning from the start of the winter heating season, vehicle emissions, crop burning and a lack of stronger winds, were factors contributing to the smog, Xinhua reported Monday, citing environmental authorities in Heilongjiang. The northeastern Chinese provinces of Jilin and Liaoning were also struggling with heavy smog on Tuesday, it said.

As public pressure has mounted in China in recent months, authorities have shown a new urgency in their efforts to control air pollution.

Many Chinese cities, including the capital, Beijing, have imposed limits on car purchases, hoping to ease the traffic congestion while managing air pollution. Beijing's city government is launching a longer-term plan to control industries such as cement and steel, which are considered to be heavy polluters. China's central government is also spending an additional five billion yuan (\$820 million) to improve air quality in the northern region covering Beijing, the port city of Tianjin as well as Hebei province.



A street in Changchun in Jilin province is shrouded in smog like much of northeastern China Tuesday, two days after the start of heating season. *Reuters*

Enveloped in Haze *Reuters*



The start of the winter heating season has created a blanket of heavy smog over parts of northern China, forcing the closure of some schools, airports and highways in the region. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

On Tuesday, Beijing formally announced a new air-pollution alert system and unveiled standby measures for the highest "red alert" level, including curbs on construction as well as traffic and recommendations that schools halt outdoor activities.

In Harbin on Tuesday, the density of small, health-threatening particulates known as PM2.5 rose above 1,000 micrograms per cubic meter at several monitoring stations, according to the website of the China National Environmental Monitoring Center. The World Health Organization's recommended exposure is less than 25 micrograms per cubic meter over a 24-

hour period. It says chronic exposure to particles in the air—especially at extremely high concentrations—increases risks for cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as lung cancer.

Steven Q. Andrews, an environmental consultant who studies China's air pollution, said the last time he had heard of a concentration that high in China was during a super dust storm in Beijing in 2002.

"Absent a dust storm or forest fire, to see concentrations that high is truly shocking," he said.

Most of Harbin's air-monitoring stations still showed a maximum air-quality index of 500 on Tuesday. The index takes into consideration a number of different measurements including PM2.5. Readings above 300 are extremely rare by U.S. standards and typically occur during events such as forest fires.

Some social-media users expressed outrage over the pollution levels. "The moment we encounter a situation like the Harbin haze that's happening right now, the government remains silent and shirks their responsibilities," Heilongjiang radio reporter Guo Yazhou wrote on [Sina Corp.](#)'s Twitter-like microblog service Weibo. "Based on current technology, I'm afraid that Heilongjiang province won't be able to change its winter-heating situation.... We need our government to start doing something proactive. Our requirements aren't high, we just want clean food, clean water and clean air."

A new study by the World Health Organization offers stunning statistics that health authorities globally will have to consider. Who is most at risk for getting lung cancer as a result of exposure to air pollution? How many people do authorities believe die each year as a result of pollution-related lung cancer? WSJ's Jason Bellini has [#TheShortAnswer](#). (Image: NASA)



At a news conference on Beijing's new emergency antipollution measures, a spokesman for the city's environmental-protection bureau blamed Harbin's recent buildup of air pollution on poor weather patterns rather than on the start of winter heating season, which began Sunday.

"We have to manage the air pollution [in Beijing], but there is also a need for good weather conditions to diffuse the pollutants," he said.

Separately, China's Ministry of Environmental Protection said Tuesday that the northern region of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei had the worst air-pollution ranking in the third quarter, with air quality below government standards 62.5% of the time. However, air quality improved in the region during the quarter, reaching standards 37.5% of the time versus 33.8% in the second quarter, the statement said. Hebei province surrounds Beijing, while the industrial city of Tianjin is nearby.

Of the 10 cities with the worst air quality, seven were in Hebei province. The others were the city of Jinan in Shandong province and Tianjin and Zhengzhou in Henan province, the ministry said. Harbin received no mention.

—Yajun Zhang and Lillian Lin contributed to this article.