Protecting Visibility in National Parks and Scenic Areas

AMENDMENTS TO THE REGIONAL HAZE RULE

On December 14, 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) finalized revisions to the Regional Haze Rule, which describes actions that states must take when submitting regional haze state implementation plans (SIPs) and progress reports. The regional haze program helps to protect clear views in national parks, such as Grand Canyon National Park, and wilderness areas, such as the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Vistas in these areas are often obscured by regional haze caused by emissions from numerous sources located over a wide geographic area. Over the past decade, the Regional Haze Rule has helped to reduce emissions of visibility-impairing pollutants by thousands of tons each year and improve visibility. Fewer emissions also mean improved public health for millions of Americans.

ACTION

- States are required to submit periodic plans demonstrating how they have and will continue to make progress towards achieving their visibility improvement goals. The first state plans were due in 2007 and covered the 2008-2018 first planning period. This revised rule addresses requirements for the second planning period.

- EPA is finalizing revisions to various requirements of the Regional Haze Rule that will streamline, strengthen, and clarify aspects of the agency's regional haze program including:
  - Strengthening the federal land manager (FLM) consultation requirements to ensure that any issues that arise are raised early on in the planning process, even before SIPs or progress reports are submitted.
  - Updating the SIP submittal deadlines for the second planning period from July 31, 2018 to July 31, 2021 to ensure that they align with the steps states are already taking to address other Clean Air Act actions.
    - The end date for the second planning period remains 2028. That is, the focus of state planning will be emission reduction measures that should be underway by 2028, as was required by the pre-existing rule.
    - This extension will allow states to consider planning for other federal programs including the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, the 2010 1-hour SO2 National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS), and the 2012 annual fine particle (PM2.5) NAAQS while conducting their regional haze planning.
  - Adjusting interim progress report submission deadlines so that second and subsequent progress reports will be due by January 31, 2025, July 31, 2033, and every 10 years thereafter. This means that one progress report will be required mid-way through each planning period.
  - Removing the requirement for progress reports to take the form of SIP revisions. States will be required to consult with Federal Land Managers and obtain public comment on

their progress reports before submission to the EPA.
    - These progress reports will be reviewed by the EPA, but the EPA will not formally approve or disapprove them.

- Additionally, EPA is finalizing clarifications to reflect the Agency's long-standing interpretations of the 1999 Regional Haze Rule, including:
    - Requirements that reasonable progress goals be set based on the long-term strategy.
    - Obligations of states with mandatory Class I areas and other states contributing to impairment at those areas.
    - Obligations on states setting reasonable progress goals that provide for a slower rate of progress than that needed to attain natural conditions by 2064.

- EPA consulted widely with, and considered many comments from, states, tribes, federal land managers, and other stakeholders in developing this final rule, which responds to many issues that have arisen throughout the first planning period. In addition, public hearings were held on May 19, 2016 in Washington, DC and on June 1, 2016 in Denver, Colorado.

- Together, these updates will ensure that haze-forming pollution continues to be reduced, while providing states and industry the time, tools, and flexibility they need to meet Clean Air Act requirements.

BACKGROUND

- Regional haze reduces visibility and is caused by the emission of air pollutants, primarily particle pollution, from numerous sources located over a wide geographic area. Fine particle pollution can also cause serious health problems including premature death.

- The Clean Air Act established a national visibility goal to prevent any future, and remedy any existing, visibility impairment in national parks and wilderness areas. "Impairment" specifically refers to human caused air pollution.
    - In 1980, the EPA finalized regulations to address Reasonably Attributable Visibility Impairment (RAVI). For the most part the regional haze program addresses the effects that a large and geographically dispersed set of sources has on visibility in downwind areas, where no single source can be identified as predominately responsible. Sometimes, however, visibility impairment can be attributed to a single source or small groups of sources, and this is what RAVI is designed to address.
    - In 1999, the EPA promulgated the Regional Haze Rule to address regional haze. The Regional Haze Rule calls for states to establish goals and emission reduction strategies for improving visibility in Federal Class I areas.

- Based on visibility data through 2014, considerable visibility improvements have been made in affected areas in the eastern United States and some western areas on the 20 percent haziest days – see Figures 1 and 2.

- The National Park Service estimates that emissions controls established under the first planning period led to approximately 500,000 tons/year of sulfur dioxide (SO_2) and 300,000 tons/year of oxides of nitrogen (NOx) reductions.
- The improvements in visibility are a result of state and federal efforts to reduce particle pollution and the precursor pollutants that contribute to it, including the Regional Haze Rule.
- Eastern Class I areas have seen dramatic visibility improvements since 2000 due to emissions reductions required by the regional haze program and by other programs such as the Acid Rain Program and the Cross-state Air Pollution Rule. Visibility in western Class I areas is occasionally impacted by wildfires and dust storms which can mask visibility improvements due to anthropogenic emissions reductions.

- The EPA intends to provide additional guidance for states to use in developing their second planning period SIPs.

Figure 1. Average visibility conditions over the 2000-2004 baseline period on the 20% worst visibility days.

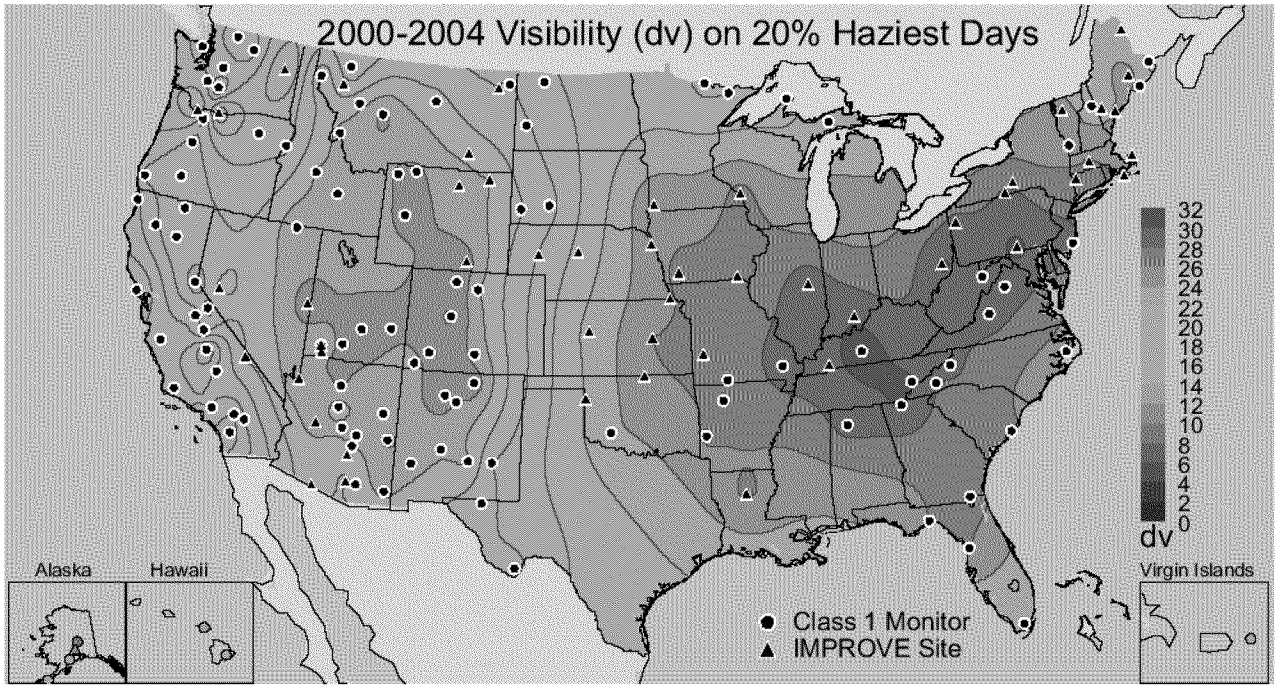
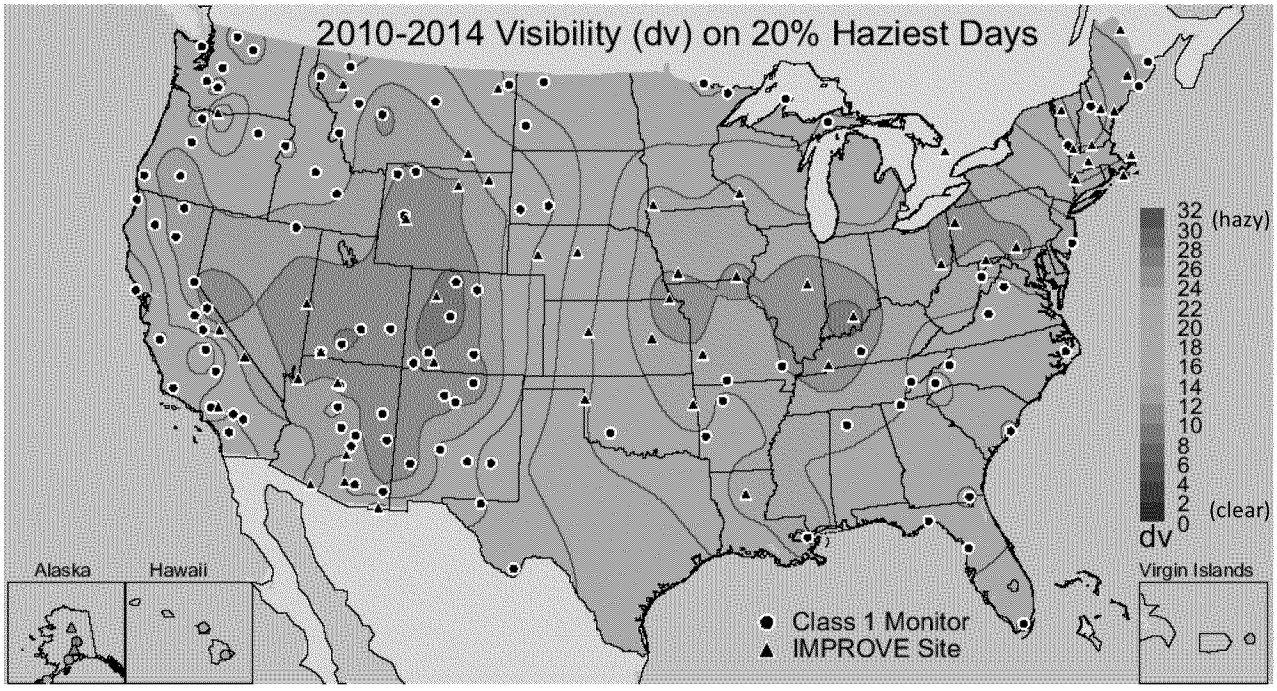


Figure 2. Average visibility conditions over the 2010-2014 period on the 20% worst visibility days.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- To download a copy of the final rule from the EPA website, go to "Recent Actions" at the following address: https://www.epa.gov/visibility/visibility-regulatory-actions.

- For more information on the progress of the regional haze program, explore the Regional Haze Story Map: http://arcg.is/29tAbS3.

- This final rule and other background information are also available either electronically at http://www.regulations.gov, the EPA's electronic public docket and comment system, or in hardcopy at the EPA Docket Center's Public Reading Room.
    - The Public Reading Room is located in the EPA Headquarters, Room Number 3334 in the EPA William Jefferson Clinton West Building, located at 1301 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. Hours of operation are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. eastern standard time, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.
    - Visitors are required to show photographic identification, pass through a metal detector and sign the EPA visitor log. All visitor materials will be processed through an X-ray machine as well. Visitors will be provided a badge that must be visible at all times.
    - Materials for this action can be accessed using Docket ID EPA-HQ-OAR-2015-0531.

- For further information about the final rule, contact Chris Werner of the EPA's Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards at (919) 541-5133 or *werner.christopher@epa.gov*.