



## UNHEALTHY AIR PROTOCOLS for FARMERS MARKETS

### Why have an “Unhealthy Air Protocol”?

Regrettably, the Air Quality Index (AQI) can go crazy in a flash due to wildfire smoke and contaminants from other sources (structural, etc.), a chemical spill or some other tragedy. Regardless of source, the air quality can be Unhealthy to Hazardous which impacts vendors, staff, and shoppers alike. This is especially true when it lasts for days on end, increasing everyone’s exposure. It can be tricky to decide what to do as vendors depend on sales and communicating changes on short notice is a challenge.

### Impacts of unhealthy air quality?

Breathing unhealthy air is bad for everyone, but especially bad for the young, older, and anyone with chronic health issues. The Washington State Department of Health has a webpage on “Smoke from Fires” (<https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/air-quality/smoke-fires>) that provides resources and answers questions about the human and animal health effects on its website.

### Using the Air Quality Index (AQI) as a trigger to take action

After monitoring a situation through the news or online, think about and decide in advance about what triggers any changes to your farmers market hours.

- An [AQI reading](#)? Many farmers markets have been using the AQI 200 mark.
- Do you base your decision on the forecast or do you go with “real time” reading? You can get an AQI reading by Zip Code at “Air Now”: <https://www.airnow.gov/> Forecasts are available at Air Now or the Washington State Department of Ecology’s “Smoke Forecast”: <https://enviwa.ecology.wa.gov/home/text/421#Forecast>
- How will you respond when there is a local Public Health Warning or Advisory?

Based on experience, be aware that expert, official or public sources are less likely to be questioned. However, it is also true that different experts can have conflicting data or advice.

Air Quality Index	What Should I Do?
<b>Good</b> 0–50	It's a great day to be active outside and a good time to make a plan if worse air quality is in the forecast.
<b>Moderate</b> 51–100	Some people are especially sensitive to lower levels of particle pollution and should reduce exposure. For example, limit time outside and avoid strenuous outdoor activity. All sensitive groups should watch for symptoms.
<b>Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups</b> 101–150	Sensitive groups should take steps to reduce exposure. Limit time outside, avoid strenuous outdoor activity, and follow tips for cleaner indoor air. Everyone should watch for symptoms as a sign to reduce exposure.
<b>Unhealthy</b> 151–200	Everyone should reduce exposure. Limit time outside, avoid strenuous outdoor activity, and follow tips for cleaner indoor air.
<b>Very Unhealthy</b> 201–300	Everyone should reduce exposure. Stay inside and filter indoor air to keep it cleaner. Go elsewhere for cleaner air, if needed.
<b>Hazardous</b> >300	Everyone should reduce exposure. Stay inside and filter indoor air to keep it cleaner. Go elsewhere for cleaner air, if needed.

Source: Northeast Tri-County Health District

### Timing: When do you make a decision?

Thinking about and having a timeline in mind before there is an emergency can reduce stress and confusion. With farmers markets, the timing needs to balance informing farmers and other vendors who may be out harvesting just for your market,

and have products that are perishable. They also may need to know before they start to travel to market. If possible, consider planning your trigger so that farmers know when they will have a green or red light to harvest for your market and/or before they load their trucks and start their traveling. That might mean a full 24 hours in advance.

Whatever you decide your timeline will be in these situations, try to let your vendors and other key stakeholders “know when they will know” so they can plan accordingly.

## Action: What is your market’s response?

Once you decide at what AQI your market needs to respond, you now need to decide what the response is. Will you close early? Will you close entirely? You may want different triggers for different actions. For example, an AQI of 200 may lead to a discussion of reducing the market hours, whereas an AQI of 300 is automatic closure.

And, in some cases, vendors may still want to come to the market site even if you do close. Do you allow, encourage, or discourage vendors to come anyway and use the market site to sell? What is your messaging about this?

## Who decides?

Invariably, not everyone will be happy with whatever your market decides. Managers need back up. To mitigate any personal attacks, it is important to have a united front between the manager and board (or City) leadership together. Agree as a market how decisions about the market’s response to air quality issues will be made and then stick to that plan. Do not give in to airing disagreements in the heat of the moment.

## Practices that can help

If the farmers market is open when the AQI is bad, there are some mitigating things you can do to help vendors, staff, and shoppers.

- Waive any “no show” fees for vendors who don’t want to come when the AQI is bad, even if the market is still open.
- Encourage anyone with a health condition to not come (and with no penalties).
- Provide N95 or KN95 masks for staff, vendors, and shoppers.
- Give people breaks.

## Communication planning

People can live with decisions more easily if they know how and when they will be made. Key messages may include:

- You are concerned for everyone’s health and well-being.
- How decisions will be made and what the likely scenarios are so they can prepare.
- Follow what you say you said you will do (to the best of your ability; and, if needed, explain changes).
- Let people know HOW the decision(s) will be communicated: email, Facebook, phone call, chat, text, PSA etc.

## Most of all, please take care!

Literally, put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others. This too shall pass.