

Preparing to put out the fire: Information and public health guidance for the town of Wilburton Number Two, Pennsylvania

BACKGROUND

In December 2022, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) was made aware of a fire at the Conyngham Mine site operated by Mid Valley Coal Sales, Inc. The fire has been identified as a ‘bank fire’ where coal waste piles are on fire. The coal waste consists of a mixture of rock and coal and is in piles around the site. There is not an underground vein or seam of coal on fire; this fire is in a pile above the surface of the ground.

WHAT IS HAPPENING AT THE SITE NOW?

DEP has issued violations to the mine operator and has required them to put the fire out faster. The operator is also required to conduct air monitoring for carbon monoxide (CO) three times a day in Wilburton Number Two. In addition, DEP has mining inspectors conducting daily monitoring of CO in Wilburton Number Two, and the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) also conducts weekly monitoring of CO. The process of extinguishing the fire involves removing the unburned coal waste acting as fuel for the fire away from the burning areas. The burning material is then spread out and sprayed with water to extinguish the fire. Because of the increased activity to put the fire out faster, DEP is coordinating with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conduct an additional assessment for CO and other smoke contaminants and then conduct additional air monitoring as needed to protect the community of Wilburton Number Two.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR NEARBY RESIDENTS?

- The process of extinguishing the fire may cause an increase in the release of smoke. Smoke contains harmful substances, such as [CO](#), [particulate matter](#) (commonly known as PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}, depending on the size of the particulates), and [volatile organic compounds](#) (VOCs), among others.
- CO, PM_{2.5}, PM₁₀, and VOCs are common outdoor contaminants people are routinely exposed to from other sources, such as tobacco smoke, wood or leaf burning, automobile exhaust, carbon-based fuel burning (i.e., coal, natural gas, or wood), and wildfire smoke.
- Exposure to contaminants found in smoke, such as CO and particulate matter, may result in health symptoms. The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) has created fact sheets providing general information and health effects related to [CO](#) and [wildfire smoke](#). For more information on exposure to particulate matter, view EPA resources (below).
- Since the fire is ongoing, outdoor CO levels may increase. CO and other smoke contaminants may travel to Wilburton Number Two during certain weather conditions. EPA and DEP are monitoring outdoor air for CO and other smoke-related contaminants to protect residents of Wilburton Number Two. If you have an immediate concern for your health or safety, call 911. If you have non-emergency concerns, please call DEP at 570-621-3118.
- The EPA national ambient (outdoor) air quality standards (NAAQS) for CO are an 8-hour average of 9 parts per million (ppm) by volume and 1-hour average of 35 ppm. For comparison, the maximum CO levels at outdoor air

monitors across Pennsylvania in rural and urban areas were 0.3 - 9 ppm (1-hour) and 0.3 - 3.2 ppm (8-hour running average) in 2022.

HOW CAN RESIDENTS PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM CO AND OTHER CONTAMINANTS?

- Make sure there are working CO detector(s) in the home. If your CO alarm sounds, call 911. For more information about placement of detectors and other information, visit the Office of the State Fire Commissioner's [Safer Home](#) website and select "carbon monoxide detectors."
- Keep doors and windows closed. Use air conditioning and fans to stay cool. If you cannot stay cool, seek shelter elsewhere, such as visiting friends or family with air conditioning or a local [cooling center](#).
- Monitor health symptoms: If you are experiencing nausea or vomiting, dizziness, weakness, headache, irregular heart rate, or difficulty breathing, contact 911 immediately. Individuals with respiratory and cardiovascular issues may be more sensitive to increases in airborne contaminants and may experience symptoms sooner or at lower levels compared to other community residents. These individuals should pay close attention to their health and regularly check in with family or friends.
- Do not engage in strenuous outdoor activities near this site. If activities cannot be conducted inside, keep outdoor activities short.
- Use an air purifier to remove indoor air contaminants such as particulate matter. For more information on the types of air filters available and the contaminants they remove, view the [Guide to Air Cleaners in the Home](#) published by the EPA. Currently, **there are no air purifiers or facemasks like an N95 respirator available that will remove CO from the air.**
- Be on alert for any communications from first responders. If there is an emergency or air contaminants reach dangerous levels, you will be advised on evacuation from the area.

If you are concerned about health effects related to potential exposure to smoke contaminants, please contact your primary care physician.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Additional information on CO can be found online:

- [ATSDR - Carbon Monoxide ToxFAQs](#)
- [CDC - Carbon Monoxide Basics](#)

Additional information on PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ can be found online:

- [CDC - Exposure to Particulate Matter](#)

Additional information on wildfire smoke can be found online:

- [EPA - Wildfires and Smoke](#)

A list of common VOCs and additional information can be found online:

- [ATSDR - Volatile Organic Compounds](#)

Columbia County cooling centers

- [Bloomsburg Senior Center – Cooling Station](#) Contact: 570-784-8615

If you have any health questions, contact DOH at 717-787-3350 or env.health.concern@pa.gov; or fill out an [environmental health complaint form](#).