
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 16, 2026

Public Health Alert: Wildfire Smoke Affecting Air Quality in Benzie and Leelanau

The Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department (BLDHD) is urging residents to take precautions as wildfire smoke continues to impact air quality across northern Michigan. The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) has issued an air quality alert for Thursday, July 16, 2026. Air quality levels in Benzie and Leelanau counties have reached the *Unhealthy for Everyone* category due to elevated fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) from ongoing Canadian wildfires.

These microscopic smoke particles can travel deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream, increasing the risk of breathing problems, heart complications, and other health concerns. Children, older adults, pregnant individuals, and people with asthma, COPD, heart disease, or other chronic conditions are at greatest risk.

“Wildfire smoke can affect anyone, even healthy adults,” said Dan Thorell, Health Officer for the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department. “When air quality reaches unhealthy levels, the best protection is to limit time outdoors, keep indoor air as clean as possible, and pay attention to any new breathing or heart-related symptoms.”

Key Protective Actions Include:

- Stay indoors as much as possible when air quality is poor.
- Keep windows and doors closed.
- Use a portable air purifier or a home HVAC filter rated MERV-13 or higher, if available.
- Avoid strenuous outdoor exercise, including running, sports, and heavy yard work.
- Monitor local air quality conditions using reliable tools like the EPA Fire and Smoke Map.

“Conditions can change quickly depending on wind and weather patterns,” said Dr. Joshua Meyerson, BLDHD Medical Director. “We encourage residents to regularly check air quality levels and adjust their activities accordingly to reduce health risks.”

Air Quality Index (PM 2.5) Overview:

- **Moderate (51–100):** Acceptable for most, but unusually sensitive people may experience symptoms.
- **Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups (101–150):** Sensitive individuals should limit outdoor exertion.
- **Unhealthy (151–200):** Everyone should reduce or limit long outdoor activities.
- **Very Unhealthy (201–300):** All individuals should avoid outdoor activity; sensitive groups should stay indoors.
- **Hazardous (301–500):** Everyone should remain indoors and avoid physical activity outside.

Health Symptoms to Watch For:

Coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing, chest pain, fatigue, or palpitations may be signs of smoke-related illness. Individuals with asthma or heart disease should follow their medical action plans and contact a healthcare provider if symptoms worsen.

BLDHD is also making free N95 masks available to community members who would like one, while supplies last. Masks may be picked up at our health department offices during regular business hours at 6051 Frankfort Hwy., Suite 100, Benzonia; 7401 E. Duck Lake Rd., Suite 100, Lake Leelanau; or 8527 E. Government Center Dr., Suite LL-007, Suttons Bay.

BLDHD will continue to share updates as conditions evolve. For up-to-date air quality information and safety tips, visit www.airnow.gov or [BLDHD’s Environmental Health Alerts](#).

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