

Exceptional Events

An exceptional event is an unusual or naturally-occurring event that can affect air quality, but cannot be reasonably controlled. If a storm causes air quality monitor readings to go over the federal limit and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) agrees the reading was beyond our control and meets other required criteria, the high reading may be considered an Exceptional Event. The high reading then would not count when determining if an area meets the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS).

Q: When did the Exceptional Events occur?

A: Three unusual storms created strong winds and dust in Eastern Washington in 2013. The air monitor in Kennewick recorded unusually high amounts of fine particle air pollution on:

- Sept. 13, 2013
- Oct. 28, 2013
- Nov. 2, 2013

The storms overwhelmed the existing erosion control measures on agricultural lands in the area and air pollution limits were exceeded. These storms triggered National Weather Service warnings and media reports throughout the region.

Q: What does an exceptional event demonstration report do?

A: The Exception Event demonstration report:

- Provides detailed information about the large regional wind/dust storms that caused the excessive air pollution.
- Presents evidence that the elevated particulate matter (called PM₁₀) values measured in Kennewick were because of natural events that overwhelmed agricultural dust controls.
- Describes how events qualify under an exceptional event rule.

The federal Exceptional Event Rule (EER) allows for air monitoring data — that exceeds limits because of natural events — to be flagged in the official record. If the event qualifies under the rule, the high pollution values caused by the natural event can be coded so they do not count against the area's compliance record.

Q: Where did the dust in the 2013 storms come from?

A: After gathering technical evidence and reviewing satellite, meteorological, emissions and zoning data, Ecology concluded that the main source of the dust was agricultural lands.

Although growers take precautions when appropriate and feasible and engage in conservation practices year round, there are key times and stages in crop cycles where lands are vulnerable to soil erosion by dust storms. Soils were particularly at risk in the fall of 2013 because of drought and previous seasons' crop failure.

Ecology decided that despite the fact that 'reasonable and appropriate' controls were in place for agriculture, the winds from these three storms overwhelmed these controls and caused the air pollution to exceed federal standards.

Q: What information does Ecology use to conclude that agricultural sources are reasonably controlled?

A: We talk to agriculture experts like the United States Department of Agriculture's [Natural Resource Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#)ⁱ Conservation Districts, and the Farm Service Agency. They provide information on the level of participation in practices that minimize soil erosion.

Q: How do farmers control dust?

A: Many agriculture growers voluntarily participate in the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service title programs. Agricultural producers implement [conservation practices](#)ⁱⁱ that keep the soil protected and dust out of the air. Each grower works with their county conservation district and chooses measures that meet their goals and are appropriate for their particular land characteristics.

Q: What information does Ecology use for exceptional event reports?

A: Ecology uses satellite, emissions, climate, meteorological and monitoring data. Agriculture practices information from experts also informs Ecology conclusions.

Q: What did Ecology conclude about the 2013 exceptional event dust storms?

A: Ecology concluded that despite 'reasonable and appropriate' agriculture controls being in place, the winds from the three storms overwhelmed the controls and caused the three air quality exceedances. If these storms had not happened; the exceedances would not have occurred.

Q: Where can I get the exceptional event report for the 2013 storms?

A: The draft exceptional event demonstration report is available on Ecology's website: [Publication library](#)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Q: What is happening with the exceptional event report?

A: Ecology will provide the public an opportunity to comment on the report. When the formal comment period is about to begin, we will post the details on [Ecology's Public Involvement Calendar](#)^{iv}. After the comment period, evidence will be submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency in an 'Exceptional Event' demonstration and we will ask them to agree with our conclusion.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: Contact [Laurie Hulse-Moyer](#)^v at 360-407-6783

To request ADA accommodation or materials in a format for the visually impaired, call Ecology at 360-407-6600, Relay Service 711, or TTY 877-833-6341.

ⁱ <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/about/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/air/quality/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/UIPages/Home.aspx>

^{iv} <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publiccalendar/>

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