



Preparing for Personal Air Sensors: Definition, Opportunities, and Data Limitations

Association of Air Pollution Control Agencies (updated October 2016)

This fact sheet is designed to provide an understanding of how personal air sensors, and the data they produce, differ from the monitoring networks used for regulatory purposes.

Defining Personal Air Sensors

Low-cost and portable air sensors may have varying definitions. Personal air sensors may not meet the stringent standards established for monitors operated by state, local, or federal agencies and monitoring data used to inform compliance with National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). An emerging technology, personal air sensors are sensing devices for air pollution that are designed to provide short-term information regarding an individual's immediate environment. Quality assurance and quality control measures may not exist for personal air sensors or their data, and the result may be questionable data quality and a high variability between instruments.

Opportunities

Low-cost, portable personal air sensors can have useful classroom and citizen science applications. Used properly, these tools can allow students and citizens to explore their local environment as well as learn about air quality and the Clean Air Act in the broader context of state, local, and national air pollution control efforts. For example, these sensors could be used in student-led research, efforts to engage communities in air quality awareness, or to help inform siting of regulatory monitors.

Recognizing Data Limitations

While no standard definition exists, Personal Air Sensors:

- May not have established quality control and quality assurance measures and may not conform to quality assurance documents established by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or other federal regulatory bodies, including standards set forth in [EPA Information Quality Guidelines](#), [Guidance for Quality Assurance Project Plans](#), [Guidance on Environmental Data Verification and Data Validation](#), [EPA Quality Manual for Environmental Programs](#), [EPA's Quality System-Related Regulations](#), [Good Laboratory Practice Standards](#), and in EPA [guidance documents on risk characterization, assessment, communication, and management](#);
- May have questionable data quality, and provide data that might not correlate with Federal Reference Method (FRM) or Federal Equivalent Method (FEM) monitors used for regulatory purposes;
- May not have completed rigorous FRM/FEM testing and analysis, and are likely not being operated according to FRM/FEM requirements;
 - A full listing of FRMs and FEMs as of June 17, 2016 can be found [here](#).
 - As of July 2016, only one personal air sensor, the [Personal Ozone Monitor \(POM\)](#) by 2B Technologies, has been designated as a Federal Equivalent Method, though a user would need to ensure that the instrument is used according to FEM protocol, including appropriate ambient conditions and calibration.
- Are outside of the various networks used to establish attainment status for the [NAAQS](#), which include:
 - [State and Local Air Monitoring Stations \(SLAMS\)](#)
 - States must provide EPA's Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards with an annual summary of monitoring results at each SLAMS monitor, and detailed results must be available to the EPA upon request.



- [Photochemical Assessment Monitoring Stations \(PAMS\)](#)
 - PAMS are used to monitor ozone, oxides of nitrogen, and volatile organic compounds as part of state implementation plan monitoring networks in ozone nonattainment areas.
- May display air quality information differently than those data used by air agencies, including averaging time, units of measure, level, exposure, and method;
- Are likely not used for regulatory purposes;
- May lack a scientific basis for assessing health effects from short-term exposure, as there is often not enough scientific data to support health effects evaluations of short-term (1-minute or 1-second) measurements from sensors;
- Might not be operated in ambient conditions or by siting requirements found in [Title 40, Part 58 of the Code of Federal Regulations \(CFR\), Appendix E](#);
- May have diminished accuracy from humidity, temperature, transitioning from indoors to outdoors (or vice versa), as well as cross sensitivities to other gases;
- May not have the geographical information and documentation that are necessary to ensure consistent and comparable data;
- May not be built to accommodate an air metering system, and likely does not provide a known volume of air in order to appropriately calculate a concentration of contaminant;
- Need regular calibration and may be subject to drift and decreased sensitivity over time;
- May have a high variability between instruments; and/or
- May or may not be certified by third parties or regulatory agencies.

Other Relevant Background Information

National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS): [Section 109 of the Clean Air Act](#) (CAA) requires EPA to establish both primary and secondary NAAQS. Primary NAAQS are “standards the attainment and maintenance of which ... are requisite to protect the public health,” while secondary NAAQS “specify a level of air quality the attainment and maintenance of which ... is requisite to protect the public welfare from any known or anticipated adverse effects associated with the presence of such air pollutant in the ambient air.” The EPA has established NAAQS for six principal pollutants (or [criteria air pollutants](#)), which are periodically reviewed, and may be revised.

EPA’s Federal Reference and Equivalent Methods: [Section 103 of the CAA](#) directs EPA to “conduct a program of research, testing, and development of methods for sampling, measurement, monitoring, analysis, and modeling of air pollutants.” In accordance with Title 40, Part 53 of the CFR ([40 CFR Part 53](#)), EPA establishes FRMs and FEMs for specific criteria pollutants, which are used in compliance monitoring of the NAAQS.

Monitoring Ambient Air Quality with Appropriate Data: [40 CFR Part 58](#) specifies requirements for measuring and reporting ambient air quality information. These requirements include:

- Quality assurance procedures for monitor operation and data handling;
- Methodology used in monitoring stations;
- Operating schedule;
- Siting parameters for instruments or instrument probes;
- Minimum ambient air quality monitoring network requirements used to provide support to the State implementation plans (SIP), national air quality assessments, and policy decisions. These minimums are described as part of the network design requirements, including minimum numbers and placement of monitors of each type; and
- Air quality data reporting, and requirements for the daily reporting of an index of ambient air quality.

Recommended Sources for Additional Information about Air Quality and Personal Air Sensors

- State and local air agencies;
- U.S. EPA's [Air Quality Trends](#), which provides yearly trends on the six criteria pollutants;
- U.S. EPA's [Green Book](#), which provides detailed information about NAAQS designations, classifications and nonattainment status;
- U.S. EPA's [Report on the Environment \(ROE\)](#), which evaluates air quality trends;
- U.S. EPA's [Air Quality Index \(AQI\)](#), which is EPA's index for reporting daily air quality;
- U.S. EPA's [Air Sensor Toolbox for Citizen Scientists, Researchers and Developers](#); and
- U.S. EPA's [Air Sensor Guidebook](#).
- The topical session *Preparing for Personal Air Sensors: Communication, Context and Perspectives* was held at AAPCA's 2016 Fall Business Meeting. Presentations from the session can be seen [here](#).

For more information from the Association of Air Pollution Control Agencies,
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