

# Study finds unhealthy pollution levels in local bars

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Natrona County bars and restaurants that allow smoking expose customers and workers to harmful levels of air pollution, according to a report being released today.

The report, based on a study which assessed the air quality in 15 smoking establishments, concludes full-time workers are exposed to air pollution levels four times higher than what is considered safe by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Air pollution levels inside the businesses were an average 56 times higher than levels found in smoke-free businesses.

SmokeFree Natrona County, an advocacy group campaigning to end smoking in businesses, used air quality monitors to test conditions inside the establishments. The monitors measured the concentration of fine particle air pollution, which is released from burning cigarettes and is associated with heart and lung disease.

The Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, N.Y., analyzed the results. The testing found an average of 224 micrograms per cubic meter of fine particle air pollution at businesses that allowed smoking. Anything above 200 is considered “very unhealthy,” according to the EPA’s air quality index.

“What people need to realize is indoor environments with smoking are extremely polluted,” said Mark Travers, the report’s author and a research scientist at the cancer institute.

The level of pollution found during the study puts customers and workers at higher risk of heart and lung problems, he added. The only comparable outdoor air conditions would exist during a forest fire.

The four non-smoking businesses included in the study all had air quality levels within the EPA’s “good” range.

The report does not identify the restaurants and bars included in the air quality tests. SmokeFree Natrona County said it would not release the names of the businesses, but did confirm they were all located in Casper, Mills and Evansville.

Testing took place in the fall. Monitoring was done for at least 30 minutes and performed discreetly in order not to alter people’s normal habits, according to the study.

The results illustrate the serious health issues related to second-hand smoke, SmokeFree Natrona County Campaign Manager Rachel Bailey said. She hoped it would help people understand why the group is seeking smoke-free ordinances.

“It gives scientific evidence that this is a problem here in Natrona County,” she said.

This fall, the group plans to ask the governments of Casper, Mills and Evansville to adopt ordinances to prohibit workplace smoking. Currently, that decision is left up to individual business owners.

At Moonlight Liquors and Lounge in Casper, where smoking is allowed, customers weren’t impressed with the study.

“Not at all,” retired computer analyst John Keenom said as he enjoyed a cigarette and a beer. “Anybody that is stupid enough to think that sitting in a smoky bar is good for their health, they are dumber than a post.”

Bartender Jeremy Toribio admitted he did worry a bit about working in a smoky environment, but hadn’t yet noticed any impacts to his own health. He was quick to add that it was his choice to tend bar in a business that allowed smoking.

“If I was too worried about it, I wouldn’t work here,” he said.

Across town, Wonder Bar General Manager Brian Prosis wasn’t surprised when told of the study’s findings. The Wonder Bar does not permit smoking, but Prosis said when he’s spent time at bars that do, he often wakes up feeling bad the following morning.

“You just feel kind of sick,” he said.

Last fall, the Casper-Natrona County Board of Health balked at pursuing a countywide workplace smoking ban. Since then several businesses, including Sunrise Lanes and El Mark-O Lanes, have decided to go smoke-free.