



At a Glance

The EPA Needs to Address Increasing Air Pollution at Ports

Why We Did This Evaluation

To accomplish this objective:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General initiated this evaluation to determine what steps, if any, the EPA is taking to address the increase in air pollution from oceangoing vessels at U.S. maritime ports.

In the *FY 2022–2026 EPA Strategic Plan*, the EPA’s goal to “ensure clean and healthy air for all communities” includes an objective to “improve air quality and reduce localized pollution and health impacts.” The Clean Air Act enables the federal government to regulate air pollution from the maritime shipping industry. Ports across the United States have experienced unprecedented levels of maritime traffic since the spring of 2020, resulting in significant amounts of air pollution in near-port communities.

To support this EPA mission-related effort:

- *Improving air quality.*

To address this top EPA management challenge:

- *Mitigating causes and adapting to impacts of climate change.*

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What We Found

The EPA needs to collect additional data to successfully track air emissions near ports. The Agency has not taken steps to address increases in air pollution at U.S. maritime ports beyond working with communities through the Ports Initiative, which is the Agency’s voluntary program that encourages ports to decrease emissions and increase efficiency. Additionally, the EPA is not fully tracking changes in air emissions from oceangoing vessels, at ports, potentially putting human health at risk in near-port communities. Air quality monitoring is nonexistent at most U.S. ports. In the absence of air monitors, community groups in near-port communities have sought to address data gaps on their own, often using low-cost air monitors. Yet, the EPA has limited guidance on how to use both the low-cost monitors and the data from them to track emissions.

Additionally, while the EPA provides technical instructions to ports that choose to complete emissions inventories, which can be used to track emissions specifically from oceangoing vessels, ports varied in the extent to which they conducted and publicly released emissions inventories. An **emissions inventory** is a database that lists, by source, the amount of air pollutants discharged into the atmosphere during a given period. Of the 57 ports continuously tracked by the EPA’s Ports Initiative, 13 ports released at least one emissions inventory before 2022. As of May 2023, the EPA could not adequately assess changes in air emissions baselines or performance metrics to measure progress toward reducing harmful health impacts from air emissions at ports because of the lack of emissions data. Both increased local air monitoring and completed emission inventories are integral parts of a successful plan for enhancing the nation’s air-monitoring network.

The EPA has no clearly defined performance measures to determine the success of its Ports Initiative. As such, the EPA will not be able to effectively track the impact of the \$3 billion in Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 funding that the Agency received to plan, procure, and install zero-emission technology at ports. Moreover, without these performance measures, the EPA cannot determine whether additional actions are needed to address air emissions from OGVs to meet the clean air goal in the *FY 2022–2026 EPA Strategic Plan*.

The EPA should track changes in air emissions in near-port communities and develop guidance for using community group air-monitoring data.

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the assistant administrator for Air and Radiation assess the air-monitoring network around ports and in near-port communities and create a plan to enhance the network where gaps are identified. In addition, we recommend that the EPA set quantifiable performance measures for the Ports Initiative, including a plan for establishing their baselines. The Agency agreed with our recommendations. Recommendation 1 is resolved with corrective actions pending. For Recommendation 2, although the Agency agreed with the intent of our recommendation, we disagree on the efficacy of the metrics that the EPA provided. Therefore, Recommendation 2 is unresolved.