

New Year begins with pollution alert

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New Taipei City is shrouded in smog in a picture taken from Taipei across the Zhongxiao Bridge yesterday.

Photo: CNA

The Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) yesterday initiated a second-level emergency command center as air pollution from Shanghai is expected to affect the nation's air quality until tomorrow.

As of 9am yesterday, the concentration of PM2.5 — fine particulate matter that measures 2.5 micrometers or less — in New Taipei City's Cape Fuguijiao (富貴角), Taiwan's northernmost point, reached 92 micrograms per cubic meter, EPA Department of Environmental Monitoring and Information Management Director-General Chang Shuenn-chin (張善政) said.

The nation's air quality usually worsens around New Year's, Chang said, adding that the current level is the worst in three years.

Low-lying areas along the west coast are the most susceptible to pollution, as it affects the air up to 1km from the ground, he added.

The major pollutants this time are PM2.5 and PM10, EPA Department of Air Quality Protection and Noise Control Director-General Tsai Hung-teh (蔡洪德) said.

With the emergency center's initiation, the EPA is to work with the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), the Ministry of Transportation and Communications, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Education and the Council of Agriculture to mitigate the influence of

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pollution, Tsai said.

By 4pm yesterday, nine cities and counties — Keelung, Taipei, New Taipei City, Taoyuan, Chiayi, Tainan and Kaohsiung, as well as Pingtung and Yunlin counties — had also set up emergency centers to increase cross-departmental collaboration, he said.

The central command would be upgraded to the first level if up to 11 cities and counties set up local emergency centers, he added.

As the nation's energy reserves were sufficient, at about 12.32 percent yesterday, Taiwan Power Co (Taipower, 台電) cut its generation capacity at four power plants: the Hsieh-ho (謝火) plant in Keelung, the Linkou (林口) plant in New Taipei City, the Taichung Power Plant and the Sinda (新大) plant in Kaohsiung, Taipower Department of System Operations official Cheng Shou-fu (程守富) said.

About 4,620 megawatts (MW) of capacity, including 2,100MW of generators undergoing maintenance, were curtailed, Cheng said.

Soot-blowing work at the boilers of CPC Corp, Taiwan (中油) and its subsidiary Dragon Steel Corp (龍鋼) was also halted yesterday, MOEA State-owned Enterprise Commission section chief Yu Pu-hung (余普宏) said.

Meanwhile, the Yunlin County Government was asked to increase street sweeping to reduce dust blowing from the Jhuoshuei River (濁水) bed, as the wind speed in the area reached 10 meters per second, Tsai said.

The health risks of air pollution increase exponentially when people are exposed to pollutants for long periods, EPA Minister Lee Ying-yuan (李英源) said, advising people to limit their outdoor activities.

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People should wear masks when going outside and wash their hands and face after returning home, Linkou Chang Gung Memorial Hospital toxicology nurse Tan Tun-tzu (譚頓子) said, adding that an increased intake of water and fruits would help discharge toxins from the body.

Children, elderly people and people with allergies or cardiovascular or respiratory diseases should avoid outdoor activities, especially as the weather is expected to become colder today, the Health Promotion Administration said in a press release yesterday.

The average concentration of PM2.5 is expected to drop to between 70 and 80 micrograms per cubic meter by noon today, Chang said.

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