

# CLEARING THE AIR: ON DELHI'S AIR POLLUTION

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Delhi is once again in the grip of its annual, winter pollution crisis. The [city's tryst with air pollution crises](#) isn't new. The rising prominence of particulate matter (PM) from various sources has long been a public health scourge. What differentiates the prevalent PM crisis from earlier ones is the public's ability to [monitor pollution levels for themselves](#). The measurement of pollution, which used to be the [domain of weather agencies or pollution control boards](#), can now be done with consumer appliances. However, increased public awareness and social media angst haven't translated into meaningful public action. The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) in Delhi, which provides for a ratcheting slew of measures — from stopping construction work to halting private vehicles — isn't effective when air quality reaches its nadir. It recommends action only after pollutants soar. A Task Force — which comprises top officials of Delhi and the Centre — advises the Environmental Pollution Control Authority, which is in charge of enforcing the GRAP. Rarely does it recommend tough pre-emptive action and when it does, there's no real pressure on municipal bodies and police to ensure that polluters are punished.

There is a sense of resignation among both the Centre and the [Delhi government about tackling the pollution crisis](#). Meteorology and Delhi's geography render the city vulnerable to a certain amount of winter pollution, particularly when wind speeds drop to less than 10 kmph. However, preventing local sources of pollution from worsening air quality will require both the State and the Centre to implement unpopular decisions. This would include an outright ban on two wheelers, three wheelers and cars when air quality starts to deteriorate, a halt on construction, shutting down power plants in the vicinity of Delhi and a substantial spike in parking rates. And, of course, getting the farmers of Punjab and Haryana to not burn stubble at all. Even if this confluence of miracles were to occur, it wouldn't guarantee blue skies on a windless day and, therefore, political brownie points. This makes it convenient for governments to engage in theatre such as having Ministers bicycle to work and blaming farmers for burning rice chaff. The Delhi government and the Centre routinely cite pollution figures averaged for the entire year to claim success of some piecemeal measure or the other but hide the lows of October and November. Tackling Delhi's winter air requires tough steps that need to be in place at least a couple of months before the plummet. At the very least it requires a truly empowered, independent agency that can implement measures while negotiating the tricky relationship between the Centre and Delhi. Else, beyond the momentary outrage, the fight against pollution will remain on a prayer, and the wind.

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