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Spike in New York City's air pollution is being caused by wildfires in Canada

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Scientists are blaming the increase of air pollution in New York City not on its 8.6 million residents, but from sources hundreds of miles away. Data reveals wildfires and controlled agricultural burning from Canada and the southeastern US caused two pollutant spikes in 2018 - both resulted in air quality warnings in the Big Apple and areas of Connecticut. The team also determined that the pollutants contained particles that have been known to cause serious health issues, such as heart and lung disease.

These findings suggest that residents in these areas will face more pollution in the coming decades, as wildfires are said to become more common as a result of climate change. Lead author Haley Rogers, who was an undergraduate student when the study was conducted, said: 'When people are making predictions about climate change, they're predicting increases in wildfires, so this sort of pollution is likely going to become more common.' So when people are planning for air pollution and health impacts, you can't just address local sources'.

Biomass burning, which occurs on a large scale during wildfires and some controlled burns, is a major source of air pollutants that impact air quality, human health and climate. These events release different types of particulate matter into the air: black carbon, other primary organic aerosols and particle matter (PM) with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers, which has been shown to have particularly serious health effects when inhaled.

Drew Gentner, associate professor of chemical and environmental engineering, said in a statement: 'Given the sensitivity of people to the health effects emerging from exposure to PM2.5, this is certainly something that needs to be considered as policy-makers put together long-term air quality management plans.' Separate studies have found a link between the exposure to these particles and premature death from heart and lung disease. They have also been known to trigger or worsen chronic diseases such as asthma, heart attack, bronchitis and other respiratory problems. Co-author Jenna Ditto, a graduate student, noted that awareness of the presence of these particles in the atmosphere is critical to public health.

The American Lung Association ranked New York City as the 10th most polluted city in the nation for ozone in a recent report. 'When 50 percent of New Yorkers are being exposed to unhealthy air, we must do more on the local, state and federal levels to improve our air quality.'

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