

Bars' air quality tests poor

Secondhand smoke blamed in report

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Health officials released a report Thursday showing the air quality in many Milwaukee bars and restaurants is hazardous from secondhand smoke — so bad it would receive the same designation as air downwind from a forest fire.

In presenting the report based on air samples taken at 32 establishments between Nov. 7 and Dec. 6, officials from the Smoke Free Milwaukee Project called on state lawmakers to pass a comprehensive smoke-free law.

"The debate is over and the science is clear. Secondhand smoke causes premature death and disease," said Sheri Johnson, Wisconsin's former health officer and now an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Medical Col-

lege of Wisconsin.

"Now we've brought the results home to Milwaukee, and we know that residents and employees are still exposed to this serious health hazard. The threat to public health caused by secondhand smoke is simply intolerable."

Authors of the study applied the same standards for air quality that the state Department of Natural Resources uses to rate outdoor air. They found that 69% of the establishments had "hazardous" air quality, 6% had air that was "very unhealthy," 13% had air that was "unhealthy" and 3% had air that was "unhealthy for sensitive individuals."

Just 9% of the establishments had good air, and all of those were places that did not allow smoking.

Pete Madland, executive director of the Tavern League of Wisconsin, said he believes establishments in Wisconsin are subject to

standards set by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, not the state Department of Natural Resources. He said the Tavern League supports a statewide ban on smoking except in bars and the bar areas of restaurants. In the present economy, he said, a ban that included bars and restaurants would force businesses to close and lay off employees.

"We feel it's a choice issue," Madland said. "It is a freedom issue. Cigarettes are a legal product."

Thursday's news conference in Milwaukee included testimony from a singer and a guitarist, both saying they had experienced health problems after performing in establishments that allowed smoking.

"I had to stop. Dec. 20 was my last show," said singer Cheri Modrow, 41, of Greenfield. "My asthma had become so severe that I had to

make a choice between my health and my profession."

Some of the air quality measurements taken in Milwaukee establishments were more than double the hazardous level, Johnson said.

Moreover, the air quality was often determined to be hazardous even when no one was seen smoking at the time the sample was taken, she said, "which shows that harmful chemicals from tobacco stay in the air long after cigarettes are extinguished."

"You may not see it. You may not even smell it, but secondhand smoking presents a clear and present danger to your health," Johnson said.

The message was no more encouraging for people who choose the nonsmoking section of a restaurant that allows smoking. The air in the designated nonsmoking areas was still poor, no better than in the smoking section, researchers said.