



EPA Identifies Noise Levels Affecting Health and Welfare

[EPA press release - April 2, 1974]

Noise levels requisite to protect public health and welfare against hearing loss, annoyance and activity interference were identified today by the Environmental Protection Agency. These noise levels are contained in a new EPA document, "Information on Levels of Environmental Noise Requisite to Protect Public Health and Welfare with an Adequate Margin of Safety (PDF)."

One of the purposes of this document is to provide a basis for state and local governments' judgments in setting standards. In doing so the information contained in this document must be utilized along with other relevant factors. These factors include the balance between costs and benefits associated with setting standards at particular noise levels, the nature of the existing or projected noise problems in any particular area, the local aspirations and the means available to control environmental noise.

The document identifies a 24-hour exposure level of 70 decibels as the level of environmental noise which will prevent any measurable hearing loss over a lifetime. Likewise, levels of 55 decibels outdoors and 45 decibels indoors are identified as preventing activity interference and annoyance. These levels of noise are considered those which will permit spoken conversation and other activities such as sleeping, working and recreation, which are part of the daily human condition.

The levels are not single event, or "peak" levels. Instead, they represent averages of acoustic energy over periods of time such as 8 hours or 24 hours, and over long periods of time such as years. For example, occasional higher noise levels would be consistent with a 24-hour energy average of 70 decibels, so long as a sufficient amount of relative quiet is experienced for the remaining period of time.

Noise levels for various areas are identified according to the use of the area. Levels of 45 decibels are associated with indoor residential areas, hospitals and schools, whereas 55 decibels is identified for certain outdoor areas where human activity takes place. The level of 70 decibels is identified for all areas in order to prevent hearing loss.