

Fresno-area air problem ranks as nation's worst

By Mark Grossi

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Traffic on 41 south of Fresno is seen through the bad air, Jan. 2, 2014.

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The [American Lung Association](#) says people in the Fresno-Madera area suffer the nation's worst exposure to soot, chemicals and other tiny pollution specks -- a dubious first for this area.

Last year, the Bakersfield area was the worst. The Fresno-Madera area has never been to the top of the list for this pollutant, known as PM-2.5.

The rankings in the Lung Association's 15th annual "State of the Air" report again show that stagnant weather and the Valley's bowl shape can stifle improved pollution control.

"Even though there has been improvement, the San Joaquin Valley continues to be a very difficult challenge," said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, Sacramento-based senior director of policy and advocacy for the Lung Association. "We have to recognize the problem."

Lung Association leaders said air quality is noticeably better around the country and parts of California, but millions of people still live with dirty air.

For years, Valley cities have dominated the association's worst-10 lists, sharing the notorious spotlight with Los Angeles and other communities in the South Coast Air Basin.

Most San Joaquin Valley counties, including Fresno, Kings, Tulare, Madera, Merced, Kern and Stanislaus, get failing grades each year.

None of that changed in the association's latest report, which is focused on the last three years of available data -- 2010 through 2012. The association analyzes air quality numbers, adding its own emphasis for days that are significantly above the federal standards.

Fresno-Madera, Visalia-Porterville-Hanford and Bakersfield were ranked among the five worst ozone offenders in the nation. Los Angeles-Long Beach was the worst, as it has been 14 of the last 15 years.

The association's latest analysis does not include 2013, an intense drought year that will show up as pollution spikes in the next report. Droughts sometimes contribute to bad air quality with stagnant air patterns in winter and wildfires in summer.

In dry, sooty December 2013, Hanford spiked a reading for particulates four times higher than the federal standard. Other high pollution levels were recorded throughout the month.

One glimmer of good news from 2013 that is also not in the report: The San Joaquin air basin posted its lowest-ever number of days that exceeded the eight-hour ozone standard.

Jack Broadbent, leader of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District who spoke during the association's media conference, said dust and wildfire are significant threats this summer.

"There's a potential to erode some of the gains we've made in California," he said.

Dr. Alexander Sherriffs, a Fowler family physician and governing board member on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said everyone needs to pay attention to air quality.

Microscopic particle pollution is particularly dangerous, he said. The lungs can't filter out the smallest debris, which can pass into the blood system. The majority of premature death due to air pollution is blamed on this debris.

"I see the impact of pollution on people's lungs every day in my practice," he said. "We all need to do what we can to protect the air and the people here."

Worst for PM-2.5

1. Fresno-Madera
2. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford
3. Bakersfield
4. Los Angeles-Long Beach
5. Modesto-Merced

Worst for ozone

1. Los Angeles-Long Beach
2. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford
3. Bakersfield
4. Fresno-Madera
5. Sacramento-Roseville

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