

## New air standard nationwide, but Valley still heart of ozone harm in U.S.



This smoggy day in Old Town Clovis on Nov. 6 was due to soot. But Clovis is also a hot spot for ozone, one of the reasons the Valley falls out of compliance with federal clean-air standards.

JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

I didn't have the space to say this last week when [I wrote about a new federal standard](#) for a nasty, corrosive gas called ozone. So I'll say it here:

People in the San Joaquin Valley have breathed unhealthy levels of ozone on more days than any place in the country — more than Southern California in the South Coast Air Basin.

[Check it out for yourself](#) on the California Air Resources Board website. The Valley had nearly 2,000 bad days since 1999. South Coast had about 1,700. No other area is even close.

The Valley again this year led the nation in exceeding the health standard, doing it 99 times. Southern California had 89.

California is the center of the U.S. ozone problem, which [triggers asthma, makes medical bills spiral upward and causes premature death](#). In the Valley, ozone just simmers at or above the health standard, damaging skin, eyes and lung tissue of people outdoors.

It's a grim reality that cannot be expressed adequately in a story about a proposed new federal eight-hour ozone standard.

It's not because the Valley creates more pollution than Los Angeles, which makes far more dirty air. Surrounded by mountains, the hot, sunny Valley is the perfect incubator to create ozone and keep it trapped.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the state Air Resources Board and the federal EPA have made strides in the last decade, bringing down the number of bad days. But the Valley still is several years away from achieving the oldest eight-hour ozone standard set in 1997.

Air quality enforcers pay attention to the standard set in 2008. The Valley isn't expected to reach compliance with that standard until 2032. Technology for engines and other pollution-creating sources will have to advance before that standard can be reached here.

The new, updated standard proposed last week by EPA probably will have a cleanup deadline of 2037. Arguments here will start again late next year when the standard becomes final.

One starting point: The lower threshold is approaching the background levels of ozone that occur without any help from people.

The arguments are always connected in some way to a cleanup deadline. It usually boils down to fairness — for folks here who are breathing this air and paying a lot of money chasing the deadline.

Billions of dollars have been spent on technology. That means new engines, new trucks, new boilers, new fuels. You get the picture, and it's not cheap.

And if you miss the deadline, there is the threat of federal sanctions — higher costs for new businesses, a freeze on highway-building funds and, in the extreme, an EPA takeover of the cleanup.

The takeover has not happened here, but this Valley has had higher costs for new or expanding businesses based on the region missing deadlines.

The business sanctions have been triggered briefly in a few other places under the old standards. Now the new, more stringent standard will suddenly put more areas of the country out of compliance with the ozone standard.

But that pales in comparison to the part I couldn't fit into that story last week:

At 25,000 square miles, the Valley is the largest air basin in the United States. With less than 4 million people, it has summertime ozone problems worse than most metropolitan areas with several times the population.

The biggest punch in this new standard will be felt in this Valley — and Southern California, too. The Valley and Southern California are where ozone is doing the most harm.

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