

# EPA should strengthen the standards for clean air

By Heather Albright Special to The Bee

Before my life as a nurse, my view of illness was likely similar to many others. Disease was either hereditary or just bad luck. It was not until I started my nursing program that I saw the effect our environment has on our health.

This connection is why the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is seeking to reduce harmful smog pollution nationwide. Nowhere else is this more needed than in California, where 77 percent of the population is breathing unhealthy air, which kills 25,000 people every year.

When I was just starting as a nurse, I had a patient that had never touched a cigarette but struggled daily with the simple act of breathing. Her health issues were not because of her ancestors, poor decisions or back luck; it was because she lived near polluting oil refineries.

Over the course of my health education, I watched dozens of kids filter in and out of “asthma vans” for treatment. And recently, I have witnessed friends and patients die from lung cancer who had never smoked or been around smokers. While our air has gotten relatively better in California, I am still treating too many patients who struggle with asthma, cardiovascular disease and nervous system disorders instigated by smog.

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When it comes to our pollution problems, we must stop trying to justify why we breathe the dirtiest air in the country. Using our geographic location, population or access to commercially viable clean energy are excuses that encourage the status quo. Defending why we have bad air is distracting us from talking about the many solutions we already have to solve this decades old problem. We need a strong federal smog standard to spur this conversation, and demand that our regulators and public officials to meet it.

In December, the EPA announced that it was going to strengthen the national smog standard from 75 parts per billion (ppb) to a range of 65 ppb to 70 ppb. According to the EPA, a 65 ppb standard in California will yield annual health benefits of \$2.2 billion to \$4.1 billion and save up to 430 lives.

While this is a great step in the right direction, science advisers and medical professionals at the EPA have recommended a 60 ppb standard; only then would it adequately protect our health. Knowing this, their suggestion should be on the table and seriously considered if we want to save dollars, work and school days and, most importantly, lives.

There is no question the problem we have in front of us is not small. It will take a full revamping of how we fuel our lives, how we build our world and keep the lights on. This might seem like a daunting task, but if we do this right we can save billion of dollars in economic activity and thousands of people from life-altering diseases or premature death.



You don't need a medical professional to tell you that air is a fundamental part of life. We need it not just to survive, but to enjoy a long-lasting, fulfilling life. On Monday, the [EPA is holding one of three public hearings in Sacramento](#), the nation's fifth smoggiest city, to hear the public's opinion on how to reduce smog. The hearing begins at 9 a.m. at the California Air Resources Board on I Street.

I encourage those who believe clean air is a right to come to the hearing and demand air protections that follow the direction of medical experts. It will be a matter of life and death.

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