

For EPA's big meeting on ozone, why Sacramento? Fresno is heart of nation's ozone problem

By
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A regular occurrence with the warm air of summer, the nearby Sierra foothills fade from sight due to the poor Valley air quality along Highway 168 north of Clovis.

JOHN WALKER — The Fresno Bee [Buy Photo](#)

In 2002, Bee health reporter Barbara Anderson wrote a passage about air quality that I think the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency might want to hear as it considers a tighter standard on ozone.

A gurgling cough, followed by another and another seizes the 12-year-old Fresno boy. He wraps his arms around his stomach, rocks back and forth and moans: "It feels like someone is crushing the sides of me."

Coughing is a signal that Kerry's lungs are irritated and he is on the verge of an asthma attack. It's a familiar sound in the San Joaquin Valley.

And it still is a familiar sound here.

But EPA went to Sacramento, not Fresno, on Monday to hear comments about [a stricter ozone standard](#). Why not have this meeting next door in the San Joaquin Valley? This is the place with the [nation's worst ozone problem last year](#). And this isn't the first time the Valley led the nation. This is smog central.

I covered one of these EPA meetings about tightening the ozone standard years ago in San Francisco. Then, as now, it struck me that the meeting was just the wrong location. EPA needs to come to Fresno.

Officials need to hear from people who live in a place that exceeded the federal standard 99 times last year — more than the [South Coast Air Basin](#), the perennial smog kingpin that had 94. That's more than Sacramento, which had 30.

Hearing about the misery among children in the Valley is worth the trip to Fresno, all by itself. Dirty air health problems and early deaths are worth billions of dollars in the Valley, [studies](#) have shown.

But that's not the only reason to have an EPA hearing here.

The San Joaquin Valley is different from any other air basin in the country. At 25,000 square miles, it is the nation's largest. It is basically a giant bowl where atmospheric inversions trap dirty air for days at a time, so a little pollution goes a long way here.

South Coast's emissions of ozone-making gases exceed the Valley's emissions by hundreds of tons every day, yet the Valley often exceeds to federal standard more. South Coast has ocean breezes to help clear out the pollution.

Vehicle owners here pay extra pollution fees at registration time each year. Businesses have spent \$40 billion over the last 30-plus years on clean-air technology.

The air has improved since reporter Barbara Anderson wrote that powerful story about asthma. In 2002, the Valley had [158 exceedances](#) of the ozone standard. The total now is regularly less than 100.

But the goal is zero. The Valley is many years from that goal as it applies to the 1997 and 2008 versions of this standard.

What could EPA and the federal government do to help?

It has been suggested that there is a need for more funding to replace diesel engines. There's also the idea of forming a special federal district with tax breaks to attract energy businesses and other technology producers to promote advances in clean-air technology.

There are many other such ideas — which probably did not enter the discussion in Sacramento.

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