

Drought is making San Joaquin Valley's bad air worse, report says

By Mark Grossi



An August 2014 file photo shows high-and-dry docks at Rancheria Enterprises on Huntington Lake. California's historic drought is doing further damage to the San Joaquin Valley's notoriously poor air, according to a recent report by the American Lung Association.

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Worst for PM-2.5

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

Worst for ozone

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

Source: American Lung Association

The drought is making the San Joaquin Valley's notoriously dirty air even worse, says the [American Lung Association's new air analysis](#) released Wednesday.

Led by Fresno and Kern counties, all eight Valley counties are having more bad days for "soot," known as PM-2.5 or particle pollution. The winter-time specks — microscopic soot, chemicals and droplets — are considered more dangerous than summertime ozone.

Four of the five most unhealthy cities for soot pollution are in the Valley. Fresno-Madera was the worst. The Modesto-Merced area passed Los Angeles to become the fourth worst.

Most of the state is suffering from the drought-driven increase, said Bonnie Holmes-Jen, the association's senior director of air quality and climate change in California.

"We started talking about drought impacts last year," she said. "Now we're seeing the impacts recorded in the data. We're seeing increases in the San Joaquin Valley, Sacramento, the Bay Area and parts of Los Angeles."

The findings are in the Lung Association's 16th annual "State of the Air" report, which emphasizes a trend toward overall improvement in air quality around the country and in California.

The organization says there is still much work to be done. More than 138 million people breathe unhealthy air in the United States, said Janice Nolen, assistant vice president of national policy and advocacy for the association.

The nation's worst air, by far, is in California. The state annually has the nation's five dirtiest cities in both ozone and particulate matter categories. This year was no different.

The Valley continues to dominate the dirty-air rankings. The region's bowl shape, surrounding mountains and stagnant wind patterns allow pollution to be trapped for days at a time.

The Valley's ozone problem has improved dramatically since 2000, the report said. The number of bad days has dropped by more than 40%, officials said.

But the four dry winters in California's drought helped annual average particle pollution spike to the highest levels in 11 years in some places, the association said. Kings, Merced, San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties had more bad days in this report than they did in 2004.

In presenting the latest report, the association featured Fresno resident Elva Hernandez, 48, who has had asthma since she was a child.

"I monitor the air every day because I depend on clean air just to go outside," she said. "When I see the air pollution and smog over Fresno, I know that I will suffer an asthma attack."

Dr. Alexander Sherriffs, a Fowler family physician and governing board member on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said he daily sees health consequences of "what is really the nation's unhealthiest air."

"I see lung disease in adults who have never smoked," said Sherriffs, who also is a board member on the California Air Resources Board.

Sherriffs also discussed a long list of efforts to clean the Valley's air with regulations, incentive money for cleaner technologies and the rising public awareness of the problem.

"The air is much cleaner, and we have much to be proud of," he said. "But it's not healthy yet."

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