

EDITORIAL: Valley air is better, but it's still not healthy



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FRESNO BEE FILE

California is the nation's air pollution paradox.

We have the country's dirtiest air, especially in the San Joaquin Valley, where the drought is hurting our air quality, and the Los Angeles basin. But we are also a national leader in efforts to improve the air. And we've made more progress on that front than most other parts of the country.

All of this is evident in the latest "State of the Air" report from the American Lung Association, which issues the annual report card as part of its effort to lobby for tougher air quality standards and enforcement.

Unfortunately, California cities topped the list for the nation's worst air quality by every standard measure. L.A. has the worst ozone pollution in the United States. And Fresno has the worst particle pollution, measured both on an annual basis and by the number of "bad air days" exceeding federal standards.

The bad air in L.A. is largely the result of its box-like topography and the region's car culture, plus what remains of its heavy industry, including the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. But L.A. also has reduced its number of unhealthy air days by a third in the past 15 years, and even its high ozone levels are falling.

Fresno and the rest of the Valley suffer from accidents of geography, too. Much of the tiny particle pollution produced on the coast is carried inland by prevailing winds. But our agriculture industry generates its share of pollutants from heavy machinery, as does the truck traffic rumbling up and down Highway 99 and Interstate 5.

Pollution from those diesel particles has improved in Fresno, the study showed, but things got worse in Bakersfield and Merced, among other places. So more work remains to be done.

Continued progress will be difficult, however, because so much has already been done and new technologies will be needed to reduce harmful emissions.

The state Air Resources Board already is talking about transitioning California's freight transportation system to zero or near-zero emissions over the next two decades. The movement of goods now accounts for about half of the diesel particulate pollution and nearly half of the nitrogen oxide that forms ozone pollution, so the ARB's goal is admirable. But achieving it will be expensive for public and private players alike.

Gov. Jerry Brown's announcement Wednesday that he plans to propose more ambitious goals for the state's reduction of greenhouse gases also will help, since most efforts to reduce the carbon emissions that cause climate change also will reduce the kind of emissions that pollute the air we breathe every day.

So the bad news is, California's air is still unhealthy by national standards, and compared to everywhere else in the country. The good news is, it is much cleaner than it used to be, thanks to regulation of polluters.

The sobering news?

If we want air that doesn't endanger children, older adults and people with chronic diseases, we are all going to have to help pay.