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Valley air (cough) improving?

Statistically, yes, but better than awful isn't good enough

Suppose, for just a moment, that you're an 8-year-old living in the Central Valley and suffering from asthma.

The Valley's air quality ebbs and flows, but generally it can be described as not very good, bordering on terrible.

Does it really matter to the 8-year-old that these sort of things are happening:

- » The Valley stayed within a critical-health based standard for all of August.
- » Since 1996, the number of Valley ozone violations at various air-pollution stations has dropped 55 percent. There still were 284 violations.
- » The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has a new "Air Alert" program that focuses on the financial benefits of improving air quality.
- » His or her parents are paying an additional \$12 Department of Motor Vehicles fee to help cover a \$29 million bad-air penalty.

No.

The 8-year-old - between coughs - probably would just like to breath clean air.

But it's not that easy.

Air issues, air politics and air bureaucracy are beginning to look a lot like their counterparts in California's ongoing water battles.

There are a lot of standards to be met, checklists to be checked and agencies to satisfy.

You have air districts doing their work, environmental groups pushing for more, businesses bemoaning what this means to their ability to conduct business, lawyers doing their lawyering, and ...

Those 8-year-olds trying to breathe.

Statistics show that things are getting better. There are many fewer air violations and the progress has been steady for the past decade and a half. But is steady progress enough when the air quality is so bad?

Bill Parcells, the former Super Bowl-winning coach, was once asked if he had lost a few pounds. "Yes, but with me, losing a few pounds is like throwing a deck chair off the Queen Mary," he responded.

An odd analogy, but somewhat fitting for Valley air quality. Is progress enough when the end result is still terrible?

Credit goes to air district chief Seyed Sadredin for admitting: "When we say the air quality is the best it's ever been, we are still second worst in the nation behind Los Angeles. There is a long way to go."

The work must continue undaunted. Citizens, business owners - and 8-year-olds with asthma - deserve no less.