

Online environmental tool places Stanislaus and Merced counties among the worst areas in California

By Garth Stapley

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Sometimes it's good to be bad.

The latest rankings of neighborhood exposure to pollution continue to place much of Stanislaus and Merced counties at the bad end of the spectrum in California. That's good if you're looking for state money to help address longstanding problems such as unemployment, dirty water, asthma and lack of bus stops.

"This offers a good picture of where we are and where we could go to target the most vulnerable communities," said Phoebe Seaton, co-director of Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.

She spoke of CalEnviroScreen, the state's groundbreaking tool that crunches tons of data to produce rankings of the neediest places in California. Championed by Stanislaus native Arsenio Mataka, CalEnviroScreen is expected to help drive state dollars to the most disadvantaged communities based on science, not tradition or political favors.

The screening tool is not restricted to environmental activists, academics and corporations fearful of bad-guy labels. With a few computer keystrokes, regular people can learn scads about their own neighborhoods and compare them to others across town, in other counties or anywhere in California.

For example, CalEnviroScreen suggests that young couples near Vintage Faire Mall have a record of producing tiny babies; Modesto's Highway Village could not be more exposed to pesticides; and many Riverbank families might consider investing in water filters.

Anyone with online access can pinpoint on colorful maps neighborhoods that should worry about ozone, traffic or exposure to hazardous waste or dirty air. Also available is information on social characteristics including race, language isolation, unemployment, education and poverty.

California's Environmental Protection Agency hopes people will say what they like and don't like about the rankings. Seeking feedback is "a basic pillar of environmental justice," said Mataka, raised in an activist Grayson family before ascending to his post as Cal-EPA's assistant secretary for environmental justice.

From a broader view, these communities made it into the state's worst 10 percent in terms of pollution exposure, cross-referenced with social problems:

- West and south Modesto, and some Modesto neighborhoods just east of Highway 99.
- About half of Ceres, Turlock, Riverbank, Winton and Atwater.
- Almost every place in Stanislaus County that's west of Highway 99, south of the Tuolumne River and east of the San Joaquin River.
- Central Merced.

Those among California's neediest 20 percent:

- Every place in Stanislaus County west of the San Joaquin River and north of the Tuolumne, except for some of Patterson.
- West Salida and the north portion of Wood Colony.
- Hughson, Empire, Keyes, Delhi and Livingston.

"It's not surprising to see Valley areas among those with the highest burdens," said J.P. Cativiela, program coordinator of Dairy Cares, a farm advocacy group.

Areas not in the bottom 20 percent probably won't be in the running for state grants.

From another perspective, areas ranking among the least vulnerable include Ripon and some Modesto neighborhoods northeast of Dale Road and Standiford Avenue, and others bounded by Sylvan and Briggsmore avenues and Oakdale and Claus roads.

Some observers praise California for being the nation's first to quantify community risks, even if it took decades of political pressure.

"It's very apparent if you live somewhere that may be impacted by air pollution, water pollution or traffic," said Miriam Rotkin-Ellman, senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council. But the powers that be haven't always responded with help, and "it's great to see California putting some science on the table to address these issues," she said.

Politicians are notorious for turning a deaf ear to complaints of underserved neighborhoods, sometimes responding with, " 'No, that's not really happening,' " said Chione Flegal, associate director of PolicyLink. "This is the first time the state has said, 'It's happening; here's the data.' Hopefully, this is setting the state up to rethink how we invest in and protect communities."

Earlier versions of CalEnviroScreen, unveiled last year, have factored in to some social justice grants addressing transportation issues and progressive planning. At least a quarter of the money raised in cap-and-trade auctions, where businesses pay to comply with air quality rules, must be spent in areas deemed most in need, and pending legislation would rely on the screening tool to further promote disadvantaged communities.

"This helps focus state resources on places that need it the most," said Jonathan London, director of the Center for Regional Change at the University of California, Davis.

The San Joaquin Valley "lit up as having probably the most vulnerable places in the whole state" in CalEnviroScreen's previous life, London said. That did not change with the new version unveiled a few days ago, called CalEnviroScreen 2.0. Instead of judging ZIP code areas, the updated tool dials into census tracts, or much smaller areas sometimes limited to a small grouping of neighborhoods.

But even census tracts still can be too large for meaningful comparisons, said Amy Vanderwarker, co-coordinator of California Environmental Justice Alliance. She would like more comparison of communities to others within a region, as opposed to the entire state.

The new version also added important data on clean water and unemployment, bringing to 19 the number of indicators, or categories folded into the analyses.

Although users can easily pull up race information on any neighborhood, several environmental justice advocates were not pleased that the update erased connections between health risks and race. It's clear that Latinos, they say, are much more exposed to pollution burdens than other whites.

Also, CalEnviroScreen lacks information about housing needs, a key concern of many advocates, said Flegal and Seaton, especially because some grant money is supposed to help address affordable housing.

Seaton hopes that future versions of the screening tool will contemplate seasonal jobs – important to the Valley's agriculture backbone – as well as lack of access to transportation. Also, some areas appear to score low on asthma risk because numbers rely on hospital visits and may not reflect actual conditions in a given neighborhood, she said.

Critics of the initial version worried that CalEnviroScreen could result in businesses turning away from high-risk communities.

"The most important message for locals," said Dairy Cares' Cativiela, "is to make sure that being on the map isn't seen as a badge of dishonor but as an opportunity. It's the job of the state to reassure people that the tool is for improving communities, not branding them as bad places to do business or live."

If you are wheezing here's why

Staff and Wire Reports

The Porterville Recorder, Friday, May 02, 2014

Valley still has worst air in nation

It is an annual report that comes at no surprise, but still gets the attention of many people. Tulare County and the rest of the San Joaquin Valley have some the dirtiest air in the nation.

The Visalia-Hanford metropolitan area ranks number two in the nation for ozone pollution, the same place it ranked a year ago, the American Lung Association stated in its annual State of Air report.

And, the area moved up to the No. 2 ranking for short-term particle pollution, up from No. 3 last year. The area did drop from No. 1 to No. 2 for Year-Round Particle pollution in the nation.

In short, the air here still is bad.

However, the county showed significant improvement in overall air quality, the report pointed out.

Cities in the Central Valley dominate the Association's annual rankings of the nation's worst air pollution, though traditional dirty-air leader Los Angeles still tops key categories.

Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield rank 1-2-3 in the country for short-term spikes in fine-particle pollution in the in the Lung Association's 15th annual "State of the Air" report, meaning their residents inhale soot and other tiny pollution specks at unmatched levels. It is the first time the Fresno-Madera area earned the distinction that Bakersfield had last year.

Los Angeles was fourth behind the three Central Valley cities in that category, but it's still on top in another, violating federal standards for ozone in the air 122 days a year.

The failing grades come despite decades of increasing air clarity in the areas that has still left them lagging behind the rest of the U.S.

"We've come a long way, but the status quo is not acceptable," Bonnie Holmes-Gen, a senior director of policy in Sacramento for the American Lung Association, told the Los Angeles Times.

Like the Los Angeles Basin, cities in Central California have stagnant weather and a bowl shape make cutting smog especially challenging.

"The San Joaquin Valley continues to be a very difficult challenge," Holmes-Gen told the Fresno Bee. "We have to recognize the problem."

The rankings come at a time when the state is going through a historically severe drought and on a day when wind-driven wildfires were plaguing Southern California. Such dust and smoke could do damage to recent improvements and make the state's air even worse.

"There's a potential to erode some of the gains we've made in California," Jack Broadbent, leader of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, told the Modesto Bee.

There was some good news in the report.

Since the 2000 report, unhealthy ozone days have fallen by 37 percent in the region.

Unhealthy spikes in particulates have fallen by 50 percent since the 2004 report.

While seven of the eight counties fail in the annual particulate category, an 18 percent drop has been reported for the region since the 2004 report

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[Fresno Bee editorial, Friday, May 5, 2014:](#)

Pollution help for Valley

There's no shortage of ideas on how to spend California's anticipated "cap-and-trade" billions.

But two recent reports lay out a compelling case for where a serious dose of that money, from the state's program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, needs to go.

Last week, in an eye-opening map of communities most wracked by pollution, the California Environmental Protection Agency left no doubt that the Central Valley is by far the state's biggest and most vulnerable environmental challenge.

Color-coded from green to hazardous red to pinpoint areas with the greatest exposure to contaminated air, soil and water, the CalEnviroScreen map featured a big, crimson welt at the state's very core, festering from West Sacramento to Bakersfield.

The California EPA data looked at environmental risks and human demographics. By any measure, however, it was clear that the region's longstanding problems are shortening millions of lives.

In the worst tract, 3,000 men, women and children in west Fresno were breathing exhaust from three freeways, fumes from a rendering plant and a meat-processing plant, and tending fields that ranked in the 90th percentile for pesticide applications.

Conditions weren't much healthier in the surrounding counties, a point driven home by the second study, which was released Wednesday by the American Lung Association.

That report, which focused on levels of particulates and ozone, found that for the third year in a row, the Central Valley had the most polluted air in the nation, and that wasn't even counting the later months of last year, when air quality plummeted amid winter heat waves and drought.

The Fresno-Madera region, with its sooty air, had more particulates than anywhere else in the country.

Certainly, the Central Valley's topography and climate pose a challenge. Surrounded by mountains, the region is a hot, massive sink that traps pollution and bakes it.

But more can surely be done about the man-made parts of its problems — the old fleets of farm equipment, the big-rig exhaust from Highway 99 and Interstate 5, the agribusiness pollution, the reliance on gas guzzlers.

The cap-and-trade fees California hopes to collect from factories, food processors, oil companies and other big polluters could make a difference. By law, a quarter of that money must go to "disadvantaged" communities.

As lawmakers debate grand plans, from high-speed rail to transit-oriented housing, they should keep in mind that the real bang for the buck will be in the geographic focus of these projects.

A pollution-steeped red zone with asthma rates that are triple the national average shouldn't be the future of our state — or our Valley.