

'F' for SJ County air quality; sound familiar?

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

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After 28 "F's" spread over the past 16 years, it's fair to ask whether San Joaquin County will ever pass the American Lung Association's annual air-quality report card.

The association began grading counties for summertime ozone pollution (smog) in 2000. San Joaquin has failed every year.

The association began grading counties for short-term particle pollution such as dust and soot in 2004. San Joaquin has failed every year.

Two years ago, San Joaquin finally passed a third test, this one for particle pollution averaged over an entire year.

But recent dry and stagnant winter seasons means we once again are failing all three tests. In fact, short-term particle pollution in 2013 spiked to the highest level since the test began, according to the latest report card, released Tuesday.

All of these failing grades come despite the fact that air in the north Valley is cleaner than air in the south Valley.

So, back to that first question: Is it even possible to pass?

"Yes, it is possible," said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, senior police director for the lung association's California branch.

And we're edging closer, she said. Ozone, or summertime smog, has trended down in the 21st Century. So has long-term particle pollution — at least, until the drought. During recent winters, the lack of cleansing storms has allowed pollution from wood stoves and other sources to settle in across the Valley.

More progress will be made, Gen said, as long as innovation and technological advances continue.

"One thing we're trying to emphasize for the Valley is we need to make the jump to the cleanest energy sources to really see the kind of reductions we need to achieve cleaner air," Gen said, advocating for more electric vehicles and walkable communities which would allow residents to be less dependent on autos.

Proceeds from the state's cap and trade program provide a new source of money to make that happen, she said.

"We get that it's frustrating to see an 'F' year after year, but we're not grading the effort," Gen said. "We're grading whether the air is healthy to breathe."

The lung association's grading system is strict, and many counties fail. The grading allows for as few as three days each year during which the air exceeds a federal standard for ozone and is unhealthy for sensitive groups. Four such days (as averaged over a three-year period) means an "F."

San Joaquin averaged about 8 days in the most recent report for ozone, and 21 days for particle pollution. So there's a long way to go.

As a result of the strict grading, some relatively clean places such as Butte County (13 high ozone days) earn the same failing grade as much dirtier Los Angeles County (217 high ozone days).

"What they don't account for on these letter grades, which is probably the most frustrating thing, is they don't take really any recognition of improvement into consideration," said Jaime Holt, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "An 'F' is an 'F' and it's always been an 'F.'"

Though the grades don't show it, lung association officials do acknowledge improvement in their report.

But millions of people in California still are at risk, they say. An estimated 1,300 people in the San Joaquin Valley die prematurely each year as a result of exposure to particle pollution, for example, according to state studies.

"I know young people who have left the Valley for education, found they didn't need their inhaler since they left, and now they plan on not coming back. That's a terrible loss for us," said Alexander Sherriffs, a south Valley physician and member of the California Air Resources Board.

One day, he said, the Valley can pass the lung association's test.

"We continue to make progress," Sherriffs said, "because we set the bar high and we work to go there."

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

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Wed., April 29, 2015

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.”

Kern graded F for air quality despite ozone improvements

By Courtenay Edelhart, staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wed., April 29, 2015

Kern County got its usual straight Fs for air quality in the American Lung Association in California's annual State of the Air report, which was released today.

The Bakersfield area has the second worst year-round particle pollution in the United States, according to the report, second only to Fresno-Madera.

Kern County ranked No. 5 on the list of the nation's most ozone-polluted counties, despite having lowered ozone levels over the last decade.

Like all of the Central Valley, Kern got an F for particulate matter, which can cause lung cancer; and an F for ozone, a colorless, odorless gas. Ozone is helpful in the upper atmosphere as a shield against ultraviolet rays, but in the lower atmosphere it can cause asthma, chest pain, congestion, coughing and throat irritation.

Kern also had 69.7 ozone days and 43.2 particulate matter days per year, on average, over the data collection period between 2011 and 2013, the latest numbers for which air quality data was available from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The report gave an F to counties whose annual average particulate matter throughout the year exceeded a concentration of 12 micrograms per cubic meter. Kern had a value of 17.3.

Some issues are beyond the county's control. For instance, the valley's topography traps dirty air in a bowl, essentially. The state's ongoing drought and climate change also contributed to the region's dirty air, with less rain and hotter temperatures increasing the risk of wildfires, said William Barrett, a senior policy analyst for the lung association.

But Barrett said some issues are within our control, such as cleaner vehicles and pedestrian- and bike-friendly urban planning.

He credited changes in the auto industry with helping reduce ozone in Kern. The 69.7 ozone days in this year's report were down from about 140 ozone days when the first of the annual reports was issued in 2000.

"Clean cars are really paying dividends now as we're seeing fewer unhealthy air days, and that's good news," he said.

But Kern's particulate matter days were up 10 this year compared with last year, so that's something to keep an eye on, Barrett said.

The county has had a stubborn air quality problem for decades, and the lung association's annual bashing has somewhat numbed Seyed Sadredin, executive director and air pollution control officer at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

He pointed out that the lung association flunked pristine coastal areas, too, and said that hurt the credibility of the report.

"I think it's sort of a simplistic approach that really doesn't capture all the progress we've made here and the challenges we face," Sadredin said. "This really doesn't add any substance to the air quality debate, in my view."