

Report: Hanford air pollution among nation's worst — again

By Seth Nidever, staff writer

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If you live in Hanford, there's no getting around the fact that you breathe some of the nation's worst air, according to an annual pollution report released Wednesday by the American Lung Association.

Hanford, Visalia and Porterville were tied as the second-most polluted cities in the U.S. for ozone (smog), the third-most polluted cities for short-term particle pollution and the third-most polluted cities for annual particle pollution.

These San Joaquin Valley cities are getting hit with a double whammy that increases asthma and other lung disease rates.

It works like this:

Hot summers and a stagnant air bowl surrounded by mountains breed high smog levels that remain stubbornly high.

Year-round internal combustion engines burning petroleum-based fuels and wood-burning releases tiny particles into the air.

Drought and warming temperatures make the situation worse, according to Praveen Buddiga, a Fresno asthma and allergy specialist.

"Reducing pollution will only become more challenging because climate change increases the risk for ozone and particle pollution, and makes cleaning up the air harder in the future," Buddiga said. "Our most vulnerable citizens — children, seniors and those with lung diseases such as lung cancer, asthma, chronic bronchitis or emphysema — suffer the greatest."

The report suggests solutions that include transitioning more rapidly to zero-emission technologies, maintaining wood-burning restrictions, revitalizing downtowns and including more walking, biking and transit alternatives to driving.

Kings County Supervisor Craig Pedersen, a director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the technology for a zero-emissions goal is "coming around" but isn't quite there yet.

"The reality is, the technology doesn't exist," he said. "Until such time as it does exist, the air [district] is using the highest and best technology."

Pedersen suggested the possibility of requesting an exemption from some federal air standards because of drought, which he said is by itself clogging the air with soot from forest fires in the summer and with blowing dust brought on by hundreds of thousands of acres of fallowed farm ground.

"Because of the drought ... we're not meeting the [particulate matter] 2.5 [micron] standard," he said.

The 2.5 micron standard refers to tiny particles of soot and other pollution that lodge deep in the lungs. Some come from wood-burning, others originate from burning petroleum-based fuels.

"We've implemented every policy we could ... short of shutting the Central Valley down," Pedersen said. "It's the application of new technology when it becomes available and reliable, but you just can't burden businesses with unfeasible costs."

"We're just going to have to continue chipping away at all those things," he said.

Merced continues on top of unhealthy air list

By Ana B. Ibarra, staff writer

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Air quality in the Merced-Modesto region continues to be among the worst in the nation, and the ongoing drought is not helping.

The American Lung Association's 2015 State of the Air report, released Wednesday, once again named the Merced-Modesto region among the top 10 most polluted areas in the country.

Like most years, Central Valley cities top the list. The region's natural challenges such as its bowl shape, hot weather and prolonged periods of stagnant air are ideal conditions to trap pollutants.

The Fresno-Madera area, for example, is the most polluted by short-term and year-round particle pollution, according to the report.

Los Angeles is the city most affected by ozone.

The association said 4 in 10 Americans live in counties where ozone or particle pollution levels make the air unhealthy to breathe.

A big problem is the continuing drought and heat. The combination of both may have increased particles from dust, grass fires and wildfires.

Periods of no air flow, for example, leave no means for pollution to escape the area, and allow pollution to build up over time.

In smaller cities, burning wood as a heat source also contributes to the problem, the report said.

As a whole, the country has cleaner air today than it did 16 years ago, in large part due to stricter standards and regulations, but there is still a long way to go, association officials said.

Poor air quality has been linked to serious health problems. Exposure to fine particulate pollution can affect the respiratory and cardiovascular systems. Bad air can aggravate asthma attacks and worsen other lung ailments such as emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Jay Herbrand, secretary of the Merced and Mariposa County Asthma Coalition, said he often hears from concerned parents about the effects that poor air quality has on their children's illnesses. As part of the coalition, Herbrand, who has asthma, provides asthma education at schools and community events.

"In the long-term look, the air has been getting better, but we still have some of the worst in the country," Herbrand said. "And it really hurts us (people with asthma)."

The report estimates there are 15,883 adults and 7,079 children with asthma in Merced County.

There are several things people can do to help improve air quality, one of which is reduce idling, Herbrand said. "But it's not for one (person) to fix, we all have to be in it together."

The coalition will be present at Mercy Medical Center's health fair on Saturday with information about asthma management.

Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the report does not detail all the progress the Valley has seen in recent years.

The district's regulations and grant programs that promote cleaner work equipment and practices have made a difference, he said. The air district works with Valley businesses on upgrading to equipment that would help with air quality improvement efforts, such as replacing old tractors and diesel trucks.

Presto said those with respiratory illnesses are encouraged to check the district's Real-Time Air Advisory Network for the most up-to-date air quality information.