

Valley officials: Lung Association report is off

By Eman Shurbaji

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The American Lung Association's State of the Air 2016 Report gave the Visalia-Porterville-Hanford area an "F" in air quality Wednesday, and the area was listed as having the second-worst air particle pollution levels in the country.

However, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says the report uses new measures for old data.

Public education administrator Heather Heinks, who spoke on behalf of the district, told the Sentinel Wednesday, "The report applies new standards even though the reporting period doesn't apply the same ozone pollution standards."

This means that acceptable levels after the reporting period were different from those during the reporting period.

The reporting period listed on the report was for years 2012-14, during which ozone levels were limited to 75. In October 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lowered the standard to 70 parts per billion.

The report issued a failing grade to all eight Valley counties, and listed Bakersfield as having the worst particle pollution in the country. Another measure, ozone pollution, showed Visalia-Porterville-Hanford as having the third-worst levels in the U.S. after Bakersfield and the Long Beach-Riverside area.

Hanford fell from third worst to second worst in annual particle and ozone pollution categories from 2014 to 2015.

The district says the Valley faces unique challenges in addressing air quality issues, and improvements in quality levels continue to jump every year.

"Over the course of 20 years we've established more than 600 rules and regulations that apply to stationary sources in the San Joaquin Valley," Heinks said. "We spend probably between \$100 and \$200 million a year in grant funding incentives in the Valley."

The district says residents, firms and business have paid \$40 billion toward poor air quality reduction. Funding for tech equipment, replacing old tractors and trucks, and implementing clean burning devices are among the efforts of the district.

"We have a long list of robust incentive programs, and are a model for many air districts throughout the state — some model their programs after us," Heinks said.

National trends show air quality continues to improve overall. According to the report, nearly 44 percent of the population lives in counties with "unhealthful levels" of either ozone or particle pollution. In 2010-12, 47 percent lived where there were unhealthy levels.

According to the report, Fresno County has seen a 37 percent decline in unhealthy particle days, and Merced County has had a 34 percent drop in annual particles.

The district remains optimistic about the Valley's air quality future.

"We are committed to finding innovative technologies that will support emission reductions in all the areas we make rules," Heinks said. "We welcome the opportunity to have a conversation and clarify with the public the progress we are making."