

San Joaquin Valley achieves decades-old ozone standard

By Andrea Castillo

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Federal and local officials are celebrating as the San Joaquin Valley attained its first ozone standard – albeit one that dates back to the late 1970s and that most of the country achieved by the November 2010 deadline.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Tuesday that the Valley attained the one-hour ozone National Ambient Air Quality Standard. The finding is based on clean air data between 2012 and 2014.

EPA officials said cleaner air in the Valley is the result of stringent federal and state engine and fuel standards that reduce vehicle pollution. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District also regulates pollution from sources including power plants and refineries.

Ozone forms in heat and sunlight, combining oxides of nitrogen from fuel combustion and reactive organic gases from paint, gasoline and dairies. It damages skin and eyes, triggers heart disease, leads to lung problems such as asthma and contributes to premature death.

Kerry Drake, regional deputy director for the EPA in San Francisco, said the achievement is significant because it means the Valley's air is improving and people will be healthier because of it. However, the region also struggles with high particle pollution, known as PM 2.5, which causes similar health issues.

"Things are getting better faster than they used to," Drake said. "That doesn't mean we're out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination. But it's just not as dire as it seemed."

Federal officials abandoned the one-hour ozone standard in 1997 when they adopted a tougher, eight-hour standard of 80 parts per billion. In 2008, they tightened that standard to 75 ppb and again last year to 70 ppb. The Valley hasn't achieved any of the eight-hour standards.

Most counties in the nation are expected to achieve the newest standard by 2025. The Valley and South Coast Air Basin have a likely deadline of 2037. South Coast has not attained the one-hour standard.

The Valley and the South Coast – which includes the Los Angeles metropolitan area – have the worst air quality in the United States.

With its bowl shape and stagnant weather, the Valley has an especially low tolerance for pollution. It takes far fewer emissions to create a problem here compared to Los Angeles or the Bay Area, where the air basins benefit from ocean breezes.

In 2014, cities in the eight-county Valley region breached the 2008 ozone standard 95 times – the most in the nation. But last year was much better: It was the Valley's cleanest air year on record, said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, with only 81 days of violations. That's half as many as in 2001.

Achieving the one-hour standard wasn't easy, Sadredin said. It took tough regulations and more than \$40 billion in investment from businesses since 1980. And he said the Valley nearly met the deadline – it had just four hours of violations in 2010.

"It's something that has never happened in the nation, where a region previously designated as 'extreme non-attainment' is now meeting the standard," he said.

Sadredin said only 15 percent of the Valley's air pollution now comes from businesses.

The ozone standard is reviewed every five years and often updated to protect the public, based on the latest research. Lawsuits and delays typically follow. Activists fret over health issues, while industries worry tighter standards will damage business.

The Valley is on track to achieve the 1997 eight-hour ozone standard by 2023, and Sadredin projects the region will meet the 2008 standard by 2031.

To meet the latest standard, the Valley would have to eliminate more than 85 percent of nitrogen oxides. That means eliminating most fossil-fuel burning vehicles, such as cars, big-rig trucks and buses, in two

decades. The Valley would have to electrify or go to other alternative fuels for everything from tractors to trains.

Sadredin worries federal officials are not giving the Valley enough time to meet the new standard. He said it's difficult to envision the Valley replacing all vehicles by the deadline.

He proposes the air district prove to the EPA every five years that the agency is doing everything possible to reduce pollution "instead of giving us an unrealistic formula-based deadline, which in our area isn't achievable."

"We think that should hold our feet to the fire," he said.

Sadredin said Valley residents currently pay a \$12-per-vehicle penalty fee to the Department of Motor Vehicles – \$30 million a year since 2011 – for failing to meet the one-hour standard. Now that the region is in compliance, he said, the air district will decide whether to keep that revenue source and reinvest it toward the eight-hour standards before it expires per state law in 2024.

A 2008 study by economics professor Jane Hall of California State University, Fullerton, showed the Valley would save nearly \$90 million annually by achieving the standards at the time. Though there was no breakdown for the Valley, the EPA estimated nationwide compliance with the 70 ppb threshold by 2025 would be valued at up to \$13 billion in reduced illness, work time lost and early death. For California, the benefits range up to \$2 billion for achieving the 70 ppb standard.

For now, officials including southwest region EPA administrator Jared Blumenfeld call the one-hour standard attainment an important milestone in the Valley's progress.

"Working together, we can continue to make the air cleaner for the 4 million people who live and work here," he said.