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Drive-by journalism doesn't help clear the air on local pollution

By Lois Henry

We always get a chuckle when media outside Kern County swoop in and do stories on what it's like to live here.

You could make a drinking game on how many times they use the words "dusty," "rundown" or, my personal favorite, "hardscrabble."

Occasionally, a piece digs up some information we didn't have.

But mostly the stories are retreads of issues, events and people The Californian has already covered. (Yes, even The Guardian's 2015 series on officer-involved shootings.)

Speaking of The Guardian, it recently came out with another "blockbuster" on our local air quality.

We don't usually comment on how other media portray life in the Golden Empire, but when a piece is this hackneyed, I can't shut my yap.

Anyone who's read my columns for any length of time knows that I do not subscribe to the idea that our air is killing us and that it's only getting worse.

I've read the many studies used to propagate air regulations (as well as the many studies regulators have ignored that show the air isn't killing us.)

I've reported how our air has improved, vastly, over the last 20 years.

And I've reported how disingenuous it is for regulators and advocacy groups to say we have the worst pollution in the United States when, in fact, air standards are constantly moved out of our reach.

Logic pause:

If we've spent the past 20 years reducing emissions on everything from trucks to hairspray (not to mention fireplaces and barbecues), how can our air be getting worse?

Further logic pause:

Actual air monitoring shows air quality has improved nationwide, including in the San Joaquin Valley. So when you hear that we have the "worst" pollution in the U.S., you need to ask, "What does that really mean?"

I'll tell you. It means nothing. It's a mantra repeated by advocacy groups that want donations and by some regulators who don't want to lose their jobs.

So it should come as no shock that I found The Guardian's piece more than a bit trifling.

Here's the first thing that caught my eye:

"Freight trains hauling oil rumble through the city, and its many refineries billow smoke into the air."

Many refineries? We have three. Two operating.

Billow smoke? That would be illegal, actually. Sometimes they flare off excess gas, which is also highly regulated. And BTW: Emissions from flaring make up 0.2 percent of our total emissions, according to Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Here's another gem from The Guardian article referencing particulate matter, tiny bits of dirt and soot known as PM2.5:

"Bakersfield's average reading in one 24-hour period in late January was 40.5 micrograms per cubic metre (me: that's English talk for meter); over the mountains in somewhat smoggy Los Angeles, that number averages about 12."

OMG! We're worse than L.A.?

Before you grab the gas mask, consider some facts.

The old health standard (which is still in place because of crazy air regs) for PM2.5 is 65 micrograms per cubic meter.

The newer, more stringent standard is 35 micrograms per cubic meter.

So, under either standard, 40.5 isn't that bad.

I'm not sure which day in January the author cherry-picked, but on Jan. 22 the central Bakersfield monitor showed we averaged 2.95 micrograms per cubic meter of PM2.5.

You can come up with lots of shocking one-off statistics depending on your aim.

The author does give a nod to some "small but steady" improvements to local air quality over the years.

I'd like to elaborate on that "nod."

The valley actually had the cleanest air quality year on record in 2016 for both PM2.5 and ozone, according to Sadredin.

Specifically:

- Zero exceedances of the 1997 PM2.5 24-hour standard of 65 micrograms per cubic meter (first time in valley history).
- Fewest exceedances ever for the 2006 PM2.5 24-hour standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter.
- Highest number of good (per the Air Quality Index) air quality days across all eight counties in the district (1,009 days).
- Fewest number of unhealthy (AQI) days across the district (63 days).
- Fourth consecutive year without violating the federal one-hour ozone standard.

And that's coming off an epic five-year drought, multiple strings of triple-digit days and numerous wildfires.

You don't achieve those kinds of improvements by ignoring the problem, as is suggested by several people interviewed in that article.

Here are couple more tidbits for consideration.

State air monitors are purposely placed in the worst known pollution areas (including one next to the helipad at the Bakersfield Municipal Airport).

That doesn't mean residents are actually exposed to those levels of pollutants.

A few years ago, the valley air district placed numerous monitors throughout Arvin (after a brouhaha over where the state monitor was located) to see what people were actually breathing near their homes, parks, schools and shops.

It was the first of a number of so-called "saturation studies" by the district.

The effort proved so illuminating, the district created a network of neighborhood monitors that will allow residents to check the actual air quality around their homes in real time via the district's website by simply punching in their address. That's due to roll out in a month or two.

I bring that up because one of the sources relied on in The Guardian's piece wants to install monitors in Arvin and claims residents have to "fight tooth and nail" for environmental justice.

How much more monitoring does Arvin need?

As for the baseless speculation by another of The Guardian's sources that lower oil prices have reduced air pollution, uh, not sure what to say.

Between 2011 and 2015, oil production in the valley dropped 3 percent. Since oil prices increased in 2016, operations likely also increased and we still had one of our best air-quality years on record.

Anyhoo, thanks, at least, for not calling us "hardscrabble."