

Valley air ranks among the worst nationwide, report says

By Harold Pierce

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Bakersfield and several other San Joaquin Valley cities rank among the worst in the nation for air quality, increasing the potential for health risks associated with breathing poor air, according to a report released Wednesday by the American Lung Association in California.

Local air regulators say the report ignores considerable progress the valley has made to clean up its air, and doesn't account for the geography of the region, which makes air clean-up difficult.

Statewide, more than 35 million Californians, or about 90 percent of the state's residents, live in counties affected by unhealthy air, but Bakersfield experiences more unhealthy days because of short-term particle pollution than anywhere else in the nation, the annual report states.

Only Los Angeles was worse for ozone pollution, brought on by things like emissions from trucks.

The health impacts are staggering, according to the report. In the San Joaquin Valley, more than 85,000 kids and 226,000 adults have asthma, more than 116,000 have been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and roughly 1,800 have lung cancer.

"Our state's air quality continues to hit unhealthy levels each year, putting Californians at risk for premature death and other serious health effects such as asthma, COPD and lung cancer," said Olivia Diaz-Lapham, president and CEO of the American Lung Association in California. "We are seeing continued improvement in parts of the state, but there are too many areas where residents are breathing dirty air and we must work to reduce the sources of air pollution."

The culprit? Emissions from trucks passing through Interstate 5 and Highway 99, two critical arteries through the state, and agricultural operations including burn piles, construction, oil and gas operations and smoke from wood-burning fireplaces, Corie Goldman, advocacy director for the American Lung Association in California, said.

"We definitely have to look at emissions from transportation sectors, and that's the leading source of pollution in the San Joaquin Valley," Goldman said.

Although the State of the Air 2017 report identifies significant issues in California, where six San Joaquin Valley counties are listed among the worst in the nation for air quality, critics say that the report doesn't give a full picture of the challenges the region faces.

"This report doesn't really do much by way of changing public policy or providing a meaningful representation of the work in the San Joaquin Valley," said Sayed Sadredin, executive director and air pollution control officer for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Kern County received failing grades by the lung association, Sadredin said, but so did coastal cities such as San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz and even Hawaii.

The report does not measure progress, or take into account circumstances, Sadredin said. The San Joaquin Valley, for example, has reduced air pollution from businesses by more than 80 percent in two decades, and population exposure to high levels of ozone has been reduced by 90 percent, Sadredin said, a difficult task given the region's geography.

"We trap the air pollution for long periods of time and have weather patterns that keep pollution here for long periods of time," Sadredin said, not dismissing, however, that the air quality in the region has a long way to go before it can be given high marks by the lung association.

One way the region can make strides in improving air quality would be to better regulate agricultural burns, create more stringent thresholds for when homeowners can burn wood in their fireplaces and place restrictions on other businesses that contribute to pollution, Dolores Weller, director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, said.

"There are many, many sources of local air pollution that can be further strengthened through regulation," Weller said. "If the district would just tweak those a tiny bit, we could see some improvements."

At a minimum, Sadredin said, he hopes the report can spur conversation at the state level about the challenges the valley faces that are out of its control. Half of the region's truck traffic, which the American Lung Association recognizes as a major contributor to air pollution, is pass-through travel, Sadredin said.

"We're trying to get the state's attention," Sadredin said. "If this could serve as an impetus to get the federal government to do more to control mobile sources of air pollution, which we have no legal jurisdiction over ... we could get some benefit from that."