

Special Report: The History of South Valley Air Quality

What is being done to improve our air?

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BAKERSFIELD, Calif. - Every couple months Bakersfield tops the charts for the worst air quality in the county... But those who are relatively new to town may find it hard to believe that our pollution used to be worse... Much worse.

"Growing up in Fresno, you know the whole valley, we had leaden gasoline. I mean, your eyes would burn, you never saw the mountains," said Ward 4 Bakersfield City Council member Bob Smith.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has been recording pollution data since the 1980s, and in those early years, the valley frequently exceeded the federal standards... Which keep changing.

"We have unusual challenges that the rest of the country doesn't face," said Heather Heinks, the Community and Outreach Director for the SJVAPCD. "So when you see those reports that come out every year, we top those charts, that's because we've got significant challenges, we live in a bowl with a lid, and we have nowhere to disperse our pollution."

But since the 90s the Air District has worked hard to regulate and restrict the valley's pollution according to state and federal mandates.

"In this 25 years that we've been working on reducing this pollution, the standards being set by the federal government keep getting lower," Heinks said. "And so while we may get 10 yards out from the goal post, every five years or so they move that goal post back!"

"You always want to be able to do better, but if you look at, from decades ago, where air quality was then to where it is now, we've made drastic improvement," agreed Rep. Kevin McCarthy. "Remember we keep making the standards higher and higher, but we've been able to go much farther."

But it's still not enough... Last year the American Lung Association's "State of the Air Report" listed Bakersfield's air quality as the "worst in the country" for particulate pollution. And earlier this year The Guardian again called us "Breathless in Bakersfield" and naming the south valley as having the worst air in the country, blaming our oil and agriculture industries.

What the valley air district is in control of regulating are the stationary polluters, like oil and agriculture, and over the last two decades they have been working with the farming industry to put dust-management plans in place and enforce state and federal regulations on the oil industry. They also enforce the "Check Before You Burn" program for the 4-million residents living here in the valley.

"We're very pleased with the progress that we've made and the support we have from all these industries, however we're at the point where we're very close to achieving the standard, but we're not quite there," Heinks said. "Which means we have to continue working to ratchet down those sources."

What the air district doesn't control are the mobile sources, like cars, trucks, trains and buses, which are responsible for about 80% of our valley air pollution... But they are trying to fix that problem.

"We are working to get folks into electric cars, to get diesel rigs traded out with newer engines, to get ag pumps electrified, to as simple little things as having someone replace their lawnmower," Heinks said.

In fact, the valley air district will help you replace an old gas lawnmower with a new electric one. There's even a program called "Tune In, Tune Up" where valley residents can get help with funding to repair their car if it fails an emissions test.

"That program got such attention, that both the state and federal government have recognized that the Tune Up program can identify these really gross polluters, and now we have a program to completely replace the vehicle." You can check out that program and the grants the Air District offers on their website.

It's not just those mobile gross polluters however... We often hear talk about our "particulate matter," but the valley air district also tracks our "ozone pollution," and those high numbers aren't all our fault. Did you

know a large portion of the south valley's smog is actually pollution that funnels down from San Francisco? And samples have even shown pollution sources from as away as china!

"We're being punished, I think at times unfairly, because it's not created all from within this valley, Rep. McCarthy said. "But in essence our community sits at the bottom of the bucket and collects it all until it blows out. Part of it also happens to do with the drought that has gone through, the particulate matter gets blown up in, so it's part about where you live but we have made improvements, and we will continue to improve."

"So it just takes us being creative, working together, and that's where our agency prides itself on," Heinks added. "We're not out there to make rules and make life tougher on you, we want to work with you and make sure you're thriving economically, or the school, and the processes all work properly, but we're still achieving those goals so we're not being penalized."

So what is the city of Bakersfield doing? And what can you do to better our air?

"We try to walk and bike more, and create a more vibrant downtown, more walkable community, for not just downtown," Councilman Smith said. "We do transportation improvements across the city to have less congestion, because when you're sitting idling, that's not good."

Heinks also suggests you park your car and turn off the engine when you're sitting and waiting for your kids to come out of school, because dozens of cars sitting idle at hundreds of schools across the county adds a lot of unnecessary smog.

"Now if you have an infant in the car and need to keep the air conditioner on, that's understandable," Heinks clarified. "But if you can turn the car off then that's for the best because we don't want the little ones coming out of school to walk straight into all that concentrated pollution."

As for the schools themselves, they are always looking at the air quality forecast to keep the students as healthy as possible. Check out the Healthy Air Living Schools program, an outreach effort that offers support and tools to help valley schools make informed decisions about outdoor activities in relation to air quality.