

County's air quality rated among worst in the nation

By Kendall Wright

Patterson Irrigator, Thursday, May 06, 2010

Stanislaus County has again received a failing grade on its air pollution report card, according to a study released by the American Lung Association last week.

Using data from more than 600 counties during 2006, 2007 and 2008, the State of the Air report is a measure of smog and short- and long-term levels of soot — aka ozone and fine particles — which are the two types of air pollution known to be most dangerous to lungs.

Of the 25 most-polluted counties with the worst air pollution for short-term levels of soot, Stanislaus County ranked at No. 10, with Merced County following at No. 12.

Modesto also ranked at No. 14 for the worst long-term particle pollution by city, and Merced came in at No. 12 for worst smog pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley, in which Patterson is located, is also home to two of the four most ozone-polluted cities in the country, and all of its eight counties received an “F” grade for air quality, the report showed.

“Air pollution continues to threaten the lives and health of millions of people in the United States, despite great progress since the modern Clean Air Act was first passed in 1970,” the report stated. “Even as the nation explores the complex challenges of global warming and energy, air pollution remains widespread and dangerous.”

Central Valley cities are no strangers to air pollution or the health dangers it creates, says Henry Forman, government-appointed scientist to the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District board and professor of biochemistry and chemistry at University of California, Merced.

“We’ve always had a major problem with ozone and pollution particles in this area,” Forman said. “The topography of the region, among other compounding factors, just makes it (the air) a witches’ brew for your lungs.”

About 250 miles long and shaped like a narrow bowl, with mountain ranges bordering on its south, east and west, the San Joaquin Valley Air Basin’s shape — compounded by weather conditions that create frequent temperature changes — has long made the region conducive to the creation and retention of air pollutants, Forman explained.

Diesel burned by farm equipment and heavy trucks, agricultural burning, livestock waste, and the use of fireplaces all contribute to smog and to short-term and long-term levels of soot, as well, he said.

“Agriculture has always been the bread and butter of this region, so of course we have a balancing act to do when it comes to regulating that industry,” Forman said. “We’re going to need to work toward a point of decreasing output to the lowest emissions possible, without putting people out of work.”

The health consequences of the dirty air, however, have even more people worried.

On hot and sunny days, ozone — a reactive form of oxygen that makes up a large part of smog — can form when chemicals from industrial smokestacks and car tailpipes interact with heat and sunlight. Particle pollution is the result of tiny specks of soot, dust and aerosols that become suspended in the air.

Both have been known to cause wheezing, coughing and asthma attacks, and in some cases, the pollutants are thought to be causes of cancer as well

In a 2006 survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California, 58 percent of South San Joaquin Valley residents reported suffering from asthma or respiratory problems, while seven in 10 people surveyed said the health threat from air pollution was either “very” or “somewhat” serious.

The county's report card is no surprise to Richard O'Bryan, a physician's assistant with Patterson First Care Clinic. O'Bryan estimated that more than a third of his patients complain of asthma or respiratory-related symptoms.

"Dirtier air is a trend that's continued to rear its ugly head," O'Bryan said. "The air you're breathing today is not the air you were breathing 25 years ago."

Nearly 175 million people — roughly 58 percent of Americans — still deal with pollution levels that are too often dangerous to breathe, according to the American Lung Association's findings.

At a glance

What you can do to reduce air pollution:

- Drive less: Try carpooling, riding a bike, shopping by phone or mail or riding public transit.
- Drive smart: Accelerate gradually, use cruise control on the highway, obey the speed limit and combine errands into one trip.
- Save energy: Whenever you use electricity or burn a fossil fuel, you pollute the air. Try turning off lights when you leave a room or adding insulation to your house, and install low-flow shower heads to save water.
- For more: Visit the California Environmental Protection Agency Air Resource's Board at www.arb.ca.gov/html/brochure/50things.htm.

Valley officials present wish list in Washington, pressing Capitol Hill for funds

Representatives state case for money for Highway 99, high-speed rail, other projects.

By Michael Doyle, Sun-Star Washington Bureau

In the Modesto Bee, Merced Sun-Star and Sacramento Bee, Thursday, May 6, 2010

WASHINGTON -- San Joaquin Valley officials have brought a billion-dollar wish list to Capitol Hill this week, though they know they'll be lucky to get a fraction of what they're asking for.

Representing eight Valley counties, officials want money for upgrading Highway 99. They want high-speed rail funding. They'd like help with cleaning the region's air. Housing assistance would be nice, too.

"It doesn't hurt to let them know early and often what you want," Jesse Brown, executive director of the Merced County Association of Governments, explained Wednesday.

Brown is one of about 20 representatives of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council pressing for federal dollars this week.

It's the latest chapter in regional lobbying, though it involves some tried and true techniques.

Individual Valley counties sent delegations to Washington earlier this year. Often operating under the name "One Voice," or something similar, the county delegations sought congressional support for their respective priorities.

Now in its second year, the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council's Washington lobbying trip extends this idea to the broader region between Stockton and Bakersfield. The mayors, county supervisors, county executives and planners refer to their venture as the "Valley Voice" effort.

"The only projects we talk about are the ones we can agree on," Stanislaus County Supervisor Jeff Grover said. "If we can't agree on it, we don't talk about it."

Highway 99 is priority No. 1. In briefings conducted in a fifth-floor House office Wednesday, and over dinner hosted Wednesday night at the popular Johnny's Half Shell restaurant, the Valley officials made their case for \$1 billion worth of specific Highway 99 work.

This includes, for instance, spending \$205 million to widen the highway to six lanes between Prosperity and Goshen in Tulare County and \$73 million for widening it to eight lanes from north Modesto to the San Joaquin County line.

The goal is to get as many of the specific Highway 99 projects as possible folded into a transportation authorization bill.

These bills are supposed to be passed every few years, though deadlines sometimes slip.

"I'm just not sure we're going to have a transportation bill this year," cautioned Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia.

Nunes' morning presentation was followed by an appearance by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, as the delegation tried touching all of the regional bases.

The Valley delegation is also going off-road, pressing for federal help with a proposed short-haul railroad designed to take farm goods to the Port of Oakland. Officials want the federal government to pick up half of the cost of a proposed high-speed rail system for which California voters have already approved \$9.9 billion.

Legislatively, the Valley officials want the region designated as a new "[air quality empowerment zone](#)" that would potentially free up federal grant funding.

"We know that money is tight, and it's going to be a battle," acknowledged Madera Mayor Pro Tempore Robert Poythress, "but if we weren't here as a coalition voicing the importance of these projects, we would be further behind the eight ball."

Three schools to use flags that indicate smog levels

Bill Lindelof

In the Modesto Bee and Sacramento Bee, Thursday, May 6, 2010

Poor air quality is on the horizon with summer approaching, prompting three Sacramento schools this year to fly flags alerting students to smog levels.

The school-based Air Quality Flag program is designed to help protect children's lungs on days when dirty air poses a health threat.

Colored flags will be flown each day at three elementary schools: Fruit Ridge, 4625 44th St.; Ethel Phillips, 2930 21st Ave.; and Theodore Judah, 3919 McKinley Blvd.

The flags represent a different air quality category, ranging from green for good to purple for very unhealthy. Schools can choose not to have children play outside on bad air days.

Smog season begins in Bay Area

Bay Area begins season for warm weather Spare the Air alerts to limit smog

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, May 5, 2010

The smog season has begun, and Bay Area residents may be asked to to drive less and take public transit on Spare the Air days.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District announced that the season began Monday and will continue through September.

To get e-mail or Twitter notifications of Spare the Air alerts, visit www.sparetheair.org.

People also can check daily for Spare the Air days by visiting www.sparetheair.org, or calling 1-800-HELPAIR, a toll-free line.

During warm season Spare the Air alerts, the district seeks voluntary cooperation with measures to reduce car use and other activities that emit smog-forming pollutants.

During the cold season, Spare the Air alerts trigger a ban on wood fires to reduce soot in the air.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., May 5, 2010:](#)

Coachella Valley has early lead in ozone violations

By Mark Grossi

There's an obscure function on the California Air Resources Board page that allows you to see year-to-date ozone violation levels. In this mode, you also can compare the totals up to a certain date for the previous three years.

If you want to check progress in terms of ozone violations, it's a handy tool, especially in August and September when the violations mount.

Right now, there's not a lot to see. Typically, there are three hot spots early in the season -- and the San Joaquin Valley often is not among them.

They are South Coast, Antelope Valley-W. Mojave Desert and Coachella Valley. Coachella, which is leading the pack with six federal violations, has a few more violations now than it did last year at this point.

By late August and early September, the Valley usually catches and passes all these basins, except for South Coast in some years.