

Tool to allot pollution-fighting funds a job killer?

By Garth Stapley

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MODESTO -- Nearly half of Stanislaus County residents are much more exposed to pollution-related health risks than most of California, a new screening tool says.

Downtown and west Modesto, areas around Turlock and the county's West Side are among the state's most vulnerable 5 percent, the rankings say, and Ceres and north Modesto's 95350 ZIP code made it into California's worst 10 percent.

The tool is being created to guide government money to areas that need the most help combating pollution and poverty. But some fear the rankings could backfire if businesses use them to steer away from places perceived as bad investment risks.

The California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool, or CalEnviroScreen, meshed 19 indicators to produce early versions of the controversial rankings. Some reflect an area's "pollution burden" based on proximity to farming pesticides and landfills, for example; the others show demographic information such as income and unemployment.

A final version of CalEnviroScreen is expected in the next couple of weeks.

North Modesto's 95356 and east Modesto's Village I 95355 ZIP codes, where annual per-capita income stands at \$31,624 and \$25,814, respectively, are too wealthy for California's bottom 10 percent, according to a draft version. Stanislaus communities on the most-vulnerable list have an average per-capita income of \$18,207; the poorest is west Modesto's 95351 ZIP code, at \$13,171.

Turlock, with a per-capita income of \$26,454, escaped the worst 10 percent list; families in the 95380 ZIP code, nearly surrounding the city, make only \$18,693 and are on the list.

About 8 million people, or 21 percent of California's 37 million, live in the bottom 10 percent, and the Central Valley is dotted with those ZIP codes.

Work in progress

State officials creating CalEnviroScreen say it's a work in progress and they have yet to decide exactly how to use it. Air control leaders will give an idea in coming weeks.

The tool fulfills part of Senate Bill 535, a 2006 greenhouse gas law, and someday could be used by air, water and transit agencies as well as planning departments.

Groups with stakes in the process are weighing in, many fearful of unintended consequences.

"Anyone using your tool will look at the maps and quickly assume their cancer or asthma is a direct result of traffic density, solid waste storage, pesticide use, etc.," the California Farm Bureau Federation wrote in a letter of warning. Farmers in other states not requiring pesticide reports "will be glad they did not follow our lead," the letter says.

In a recent opinion on The Bee's editorial page, Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors Chairman Vito Chiesa took aim. "The maps mistakenly make it look like our mouths are attached to all the tailpipes on the Highway 99 corridor," he wrote.

If rankings bleed into permitting processes, "this would be like hanging a sign at the county line or city limits that says: 'Don't even think about trying to do business here,'" continued Chiesa, a grower.

The Non-profit Housing Association of Northern California supports the concept of boosting poor neighborhoods. Agencies have "a sordid history of steering polluting industries to low-income communities," the group said in a comment, but its supporters worry that rankings could discourage investment in the very places that need it most.

Others fear that extremely poor towns could miss out on grant money if they're lumped in with wealthier neighbors.

For example, CalEnviroScreen appears to exclude the Patterson-Grayson-Westley area from air pollution cap-and-trade money because Patterson's relative wealth reduces the area's average poverty level to 14 percent. By itself, Westley's 32 percent poverty would easily qualify for grants, said Phoebe Seaton of California Rural Legal Assistance in a letter to the state.

Sam Delson, deputy director of the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, on Sunday said his office plans eventually to zero in on census tracts instead of larger ZIP codes. That would separate Westley from Patterson.

Official: New take on data

"Communities know the burdens and challenges they face," Delson said. "We're not revealing new information. We're presenting publicly available information in a new way that reflects the total picture rather than looking at each problem in isolation."

Cap-and-trade money comes from companies buying permission at state auctions to emit greenhouse gases.

Seaton suggested directing grants to poor areas needing help with sustainable planning. Others could get money for water and sewer projects, bicycle and walking paths and bus services, she urged.

Other cities on California's worst-10 list include Atwater, Lathrop, Los Banos, Winton and parts of Merced.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Friday, April 19, 2013:](#)

Idling vehicles raise risks, get you nowhere

By Monica Maye

Recent reports show that people exposed to higher levels of air pollution have an increased risk of low birth weight, stroke, heart attack, respiratory infections, lung cancer, cognitive deterioration and decreased life expectancy. These health risks exist even at pollution levels that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency currently considers to be safe.

Since moving vehicles generate approximately 12 percent of all air pollutants, one of the easiest things that we all can do to combat the health and environmental problems caused by air pollution is to simply turn off our engines while we're parked instead of allowing them to idle. According to Make a LEaP (Lowering Emissions and Particulates), idling makes up 0.6 percent of the United States' CO2 output, or 34.5 million tons per year. It also constitutes 8 percent of the oil consumed in the U.S. every day.

Although they're generally more fuel-efficient, diesel-powered trucks and buses produce even higher levels of pollutants than gasoline-powered vehicles. They also tend to idle for longer periods, with significant impacts on local air quality. Diesel exhaust contains both carbon particulates and 40 chemicals that are classified as "hazardous air pollutants" under the Clean Air Act. It is also classified as a probable human carcinogen by a number of governmental authorities.

According to a 2002 report published by Environment and Human Health Inc., 24 million students in the U.S. spend three billion hours on diesel-powered school buses each year -- even though there is no known safe exposure to diesel exhaust for children. Idling buses generate even higher concentrations of particulates and pollutants than moving buses, and idling vehicles in parent pick-up lines compound the

problem. Yet there are no federal regulations in place to monitor toxic emissions from school buses or to limit idling.

By passing, posting and enforcing idling laws, states and municipalities can significantly improve public health outcomes and reduce global warming while generating much-needed revenue by fining non-conforming trucks and passenger cars. Municipalities can also significantly decrease idling by improving the performance of their traffic lights.

But we don't have to wait for laws to be passed and policies to change in order for each of us to make a big difference by doing a very small thing today. Rather than sitting in a parking lot with our engines running while a family member runs into a store to pick something up, we can go inside and find someplace comfortable to wait. And instead of starting our cars remotely and allowing them to warm up for 10 or 15 minutes in the morning, LEaP recommends limiting our warm-up idling time to just 30 seconds. Even in subfreezing temperatures, driving away slowly to moderately fast is the best way to warm up a car's transmission, wheel-bearings, steering, suspension and tires.

If you are concerned about the long-term wear and tear that might result from turning your engine off and on for this reason, a 2003 study conducted by Canada's Office of Energy Efficiency showed that "idling for over 10 seconds uses more fuel and produces more CO2 emissions than restarting your engine." In fact, the money you will save on fuel by reducing your idling time exceeds any increased maintenance costs caused by turning your car off and on more frequently.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, stop your engines!