

We keep improving, but Bakersfield still ranks among the most polluted cities in America

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, April 21, 2021

The mystery is gone.

The American Lung Association's annual "State of the Air" report released Wednesday is not going to surprise a lot of Bakersfield residents — or just about anyone living in the San Joaquin Valley.

Bakersfield and much of the valley, according to the report, are still among the most polluted areas of the country.

"Since our first report in 2000, Bakersfield has seen significant improvement," said Will Barrett, director of clean air advocacy for the American Lung Association in California.

"But we still have a long way to go," he said.

There are three major categories of air pollution the report focused on: annual particle pollution; short-term, or 24-hour particle pollution; and ozone pollution, a major component of smog.

According to the Lung Association's findings, which, this year, collected data from 2017, 2018 and 2019, metro Bakersfield was the city most polluted by annual particle pollution, microscopic specks of soot that can become lodged in your lungs and can even pass into the blood stream.

On 24-hour particulate matter pollution, Bakersfield was ranked third worst.

And ozone filled the gap, with Bakersfield ranking second worst behind our old rival, Los Angeles.

According to the report, the San Joaquin Valley and California in general continue to face some of the most significant challenges in the United States for the most harmful and widespread types of air pollution.

The health of Californians, nearly all of whom live in a county with a failing grade, the report found, is more urgent and more daunting due to climate change impacts including extreme heat and wildfires that continue to undermine progress.

"California's leading clean air policies have driven significant improvements, but more must be done to ensure that all communities experience the benefits of healthy air," Barrett said. "California must seize current opportunities through the state budget, legislative and agency actions to invest in healthier travel and zero-emission transportation options and infrastructure that leave no community behind."

Seven California cities, besides Bakersfield, appear on all three lists of most polluted cities in the United States for unhealthy ozone days, unhealthy spikes in particle pollution, and for annual particle pollution levels, according to the report. Besides Bakersfield, they include El Centro, Fresno-Madera-Hanford, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Redding-Red Bluff, San Jose-San Francisco-Oakland, and Visalia.

"Despite progress over the history of the report, 10 California cities remain on the list of the 25 most ozone-polluted cities in the United States," the report states.

State of the Air 2021 showed many cities with fewer unhealthy ozone days compared with last year's report, including the Los Angeles-Long Beach metropolitan area, which continues to rank as the most ozone-polluted city in the United States.

Bakersfield, Fresno and Visalia round out the top four most ozone-polluted cities in the nation, all of which improved to their fewest number of ozone days since the first "State of the Air" report in 2000.

According to Barrett, over the three-year period studied, Bakersfield dropped to an average of 97.2 ozone days. The record worst was 216 days.

The report also tracked short-term spikes in particle pollution, which can be extremely dangerous and even lethal.

Across the United States, the report also shows that people of color were 61 percent more likely to live in a county with unhealthy air than white people, and three times more likely to live in a county that failed all three air quality grades. The report also finds that climate change made air quality worse and harder to clean up.

"While nearly all Californians are impacted by unhealthy air, we know that low-income communities and communities of color too often face disparities in exposures and negative health outcomes," said Dr. Afif El-Hasan, an asthma physician with Kaiser Permanente, Southern California and a Lung Association board member.

"Greater attention and priority," he said, "must be placed on environmental justice, equitable policies and priority investments that target clean-up where it is needed most."

Bakersfield looks to add 30 electric vehicle charging stations throughout city

By Sam Morgen

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The Bakersfield City Council is poised to dramatically expand the number of electric vehicle charging stations available on public property.

At Wednesday's meeting, the council is scheduled to vote on an agreement that would add 30 ChargePoint charging stations to six city-owned areas of Bakersfield, including the 18th Street and Eye Street parking structure. That's a big jump from the four city-operated charging stations currently operating out of the Amtrak Station downtown.

There are 71 charging locations throughout Kern County, with 42 in Bakersfield, meaning the six proposed locations would increase the total by around 15 percent. However, those locations are in places like hospital parking lots and car dealerships, potentially unavailable to the general public.

If approved, the new charging stations would be installed at The Park at Riverwalk, the parking lot across the street from Cal State Bakersfield on Stockdale Highway, City Hall South, Mechanics Bank Arena, McMurtrey Aquatic Center, and the downtown parking structure.

Unlike the Amtrak electric vehicle charging stations downtown, the new additions will be Level 2 chargers, which charge faster than Level 1.

The city is taking advantage of funds provided by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the California Energy Commission to complete the proposal. The \$266,000 combined will fund around 80 percent of the project.

The funding is just one part of a state plan to put more electric vehicles on the road. California has a goal of 5 million zero emission vehicles on the road by 2030 and 250,000 charging stations by 2025.

As more and more funding becomes available for zero transmission projects, these proposed charging stations could be just the beginning.

"It's going to really expand. We are talking with different privately-owned gas stations that are interested in putting them in," said Linda Urata, a regional planner for Kern Council of Governments who focuses on electric vehicles. "You're going to see huge growth in the next two years."

Lately, charging options have increased for electric vehicle owners. In January, the state Department of Transportation opened nine new stations throughout the Central Valley, including one at the Tejon Pass and in Delano and the city of McFarland recently held a groundbreaking ceremony for a new station.

More are planned for cities such as Arvin, Wasco and Shafter.

But questions remain about how popular the charging stations will be. Kern COG Executive Director Ahron Hakimi described demand for the products as a "chicken and egg" scenario. Consumers may be more liable to buy an electric vehicle if more charging stations were available, but more charging stations might not be built without the purchase of more vehicles.

"In the three years that I owned the Chevy Volt, I think I charged it, other than home, less than five times. That gives you an example of how many chargers are out there," he said. "If we want as a society more EVs, than we absolutely have to invest in more places to charge."

The city plans to watch how often each charging station is used to determine if more are necessary.

"It's a trial project," said Assistant Public Works Director Stuart Patteson. "I'm sure they will get used. The intent is for them to be entered into whatever databases exist that direct people to EV charging stations, but until we have them in place for a while, it's hard to say how well they will be utilized."

Dems push \$25B to electrify school buses, a Biden priority

By Hope Yen, Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic lawmakers on Wednesday unveiled legislation that would invest \$25 billion to convert the nation's fleet of gasoline- and diesel-powered school buses to electric vehicles, aiming at a component of President Joe Biden's \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan to improve children's health.

The legislation led by Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., seeks to build on the administration's effort this week to promote the electrification of school buses, which Biden sees as an important step in addressing climate change and economic inequities.

School buses make up 90% of the nation's total bus fleet and typically carry nearly 25 million children each day. Emissions from diesel engines may contribute to respiratory illnesses in children, studies have found, and have been linked to poor academic performance.

The bill introduced Wednesday would authorize federal grant money over 10 years, with 40% of it devoted to replacing school buses that serve mostly nonwhite, poorer communities.

It would cover the expense of purchasing electric school buses, building charging stations and providing workforce training. The legislation also directs the Environmental Protection Agency to conduct outreach to help school districts with the transition.

"I know firsthand how outdated diesel school buses expose our children to harmful and unnecessary pollution," Padilla told The Associated Press, explaining how as a kid he frequently rode the bus to get to class and for after-school programs such as baseball games. "Growing up in the San Fernando Valley, my lungs would be filled with diesel exhaust by the time I arrived at school each day."

"Transitioning our school bus fleet to zero-emission vehicles is an essential aspect of building equitable, sustainable infrastructure and is a wise investment in our children, our environment and our future," he said.

Joining Padilla in co-sponsoring the legislation are Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., and Reps. Tony Cárdenas, D-Calif., and Jahana Hayes, D-Conn.

"Children in Georgia and across America should be able to get to and from school each day without breathing polluted air, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated challenges for children already managing respiratory problems," Warnock said. "The Clean Commute for Kids Act will help keep our students safe."

The lawmakers' push comes in a week when Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are highlighting their proposed \$45 billion in infrastructure spending to accelerate the adoption of zero-emission transit buses and school buses. On Monday, Harris visited a North Carolina bus manufacturing plant and urged \$20 billion in investments to help convert the nation's 500,000 school buses to electric.

Harris' focus on the issue dates back to legislation she introduced as a California senator in 2019 that would have provided \$1 billion in federal grants to help districts electrify school buses. The issue later was a plank in Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders' proposed Green New Deal.

Padilla was appointed by California Gov. Gavin Newsom to fill Harris' seat when she was elected vice president.

The legislation faces an uphill climb to attract 60 votes needed for passage as a stand-alone bill in a Senate divided 50-50, with Harris casting the tie-breaking vote. But as lawmakers start building the Biden infrastructure bill, the measure could become a piece of the broader package that could have more support or that congressional Democrats may try to muscle through on 51 votes via a budget process called reconciliation.

The bill has earned support from an array of outside groups, including the American Federation of Teachers, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Environmental Law & Policy Center, the League of Conservation Voters and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

“Public schools are huge consumers of mass transit, and the challenge of getting students to school buildings in a more green, efficient way is one we must tackle immediately,” said Randi Weingarten, AFT’s president. “By investing in zero-emission school buses we can create cleaner, healthier, more sustainable school communities where our children don’t just survive but actually thrive.”

Trisha Dello Iacono, national field and legislative manager for Moms Clean Air Force, said the federal investment in children's health was long overdue.

“It is high time that the millions of children exposed to lung-harming diesel pollution during their commute to and from school be afforded a clean and safe ride,” she said.