

Report ranks best and worst cities for air quality. Any guess where Fresno landed on the list?

By Joshua Tehee

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It's not too difficult to guess where Fresno and the San Joaquin Valley sits on the American Lung Association's annual State of the Air report.

The region has rather consistently ranked among the worst in the U.S. for ozone and particle pollution.

For the 2021 report, released earlier this month, the Fresno area (including Madera and Hanford) ranked No. 2 in both short-term and year-round particle pollution. That's fine particles, or PM2.5, which are most often a by-product of wood burning and fossil fuels.

Fresno ranked fourth for ozone pollution, behind Los Angeles, Bakersfield and Visalia.

The report looked at data from official federal state and local monitoring sites from 2017, 2018 and 2019 — the most recent quality-assured data available. Along with the ranking, the report assigned grades for the three categories of pollution.

Fresno failed each.

Of course, the report is just a snapshot, says Jamie Holt, chief communications officer with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. It reflects a small part of a very large, complex issue.

"The F we got last year is not the F we got this year," Holt says.

IS AIR POLLUTION PROGRESS BEING MADE?

Indeed, the 25 most ozone-polluted cities in the U.S. experienced fewer bad air days, on average, in this year's report than on last year's, which used data from 2016 to 2018. And four California cities on the list recorded their fewest bad ozone days on average in the report's 22-year history, even though they remain among the 10 most ozone-polluted cities in the nation.

When the Valley air district first began analyzing PM2.5 data some 20 years ago, the number of days when the air was unhealthy each winter exceeded the number of good days, says John Klassen, director of air quality science and planning for the district.

That has since flipped.

"Now we have more good and moderate days," he says.

Since the district has been tracking ozone, those levels have been reduced by a full 90%, Holt says: "The air that folks are breathing today in the San Joaquin Valley is significantly better than it was 30 years ago."

But the federal government periodically updates its goals and tightens its air quality standards, which then are reflected back in these kinds of reports.

And the Valley has natural challenges in geography and weather (the surrounding mountains that cause an inversion layer that comes in each winter) that make it difficult to see progress on these sorts of rankings. It's not that the area makes more pollution than other parts of the state, Holt says, rather that the pollution just doesn't have anywhere to go.

WILDFIRES AFFECTING CALIFORNIA AIR

The wildfires that raged across the state in recent years have only added to the problem.

All but two of the 25 worst cities for short-term particle pollution are in the Western U.S. — and 10 of them are in California.

"These wildfires really overwhelm all of the success that we've had," Holt says.

For its part, the air district continues to work with residents and agriculture and other industries to reduce residential wood burning emissions and emissions from mobile sources (equipment, cars, trucks and the

like). It offers a full suite of grant and incentive programs to help business and residents move to zero emission technologies. That's everything from heavy duty trucks to lawn equipment and electric vehicles.

Information on those programs is available on the district's website, valleyair.org.

"It really is going to take every person in the valley to take some personal responsibility on this," Holt says.