

L.A. beats the valley on smog list

San Joaquin Valley ranked No. 2, with record low numbers

Staff and wire reports

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2005

The San Joaquin Valley has really cleaned up its (air) act.

After several years as the nation's smoggiest area, the valley is now ranked No. 2 behind Los Angeles, which is now once again the nation's smog capital, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency's latest barometer for measuring the unhealthy haze.

The Greater Los Angeles area, which includes Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, exceeded the federal health standard for more than 21/2 months this year.

By comparison, the San Joaquin region, which includes Bakersfield, exceeded the federal government's "eight-hour standard" just 72 days this year, the fewest since records started being kept in 1985, said San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Brenda Turner.

The valley surpassed the record 109 days in 2004 and 134 days in 2003, she said. The previous low was 84 days in 1998, Turner said.

Turner chalked up the positive trend to new air quality regulations in the valley. It's not just changing weather patterns, she said, because the valley had a very hot summer this year and yet violations were still way down.

In another sign of progress, the valley posted 18 "Spare the Air" days this year, down from 27 in 2004, Turner said.

"We'd like to believe that public awareness of this issue has become so high in the valley that people are changing their behavior," said Kelly Hogan Malay, another spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley district.

Los Angeles actually has had fewer smoggy days this year than last, continuing a relatively steady three-decade trend toward cleaner air. However, Houston and the San Joaquin Valley, both of which in recent years rivaled and even surpassed Los Angeles as the smoggiest areas in the United States, experienced exceptionally clean air this year.

Ground-level ozone, the primary ingredient in smog, is formed when two types of air pollution react chemically while being cooked by the sun's rays. Both of the pollutants, volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides, are emitted during the burning of fossil fuels in cars, factories and power plants.

Scientists have linked breathing smoggy air to an array of health effects, including wheezing and coughing because of irritated lungs, increased asthma attacks, reduced lung power and even premature death.

The South Coast Air Basin, which includes all of Orange County and most of the urbanized parts of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, exceeded the EPA's smog standard on 84 days this year.

Last year, the region exceeded the standard on 90 days, and in 2003, it surpassed it on 120 days.

Texas officials said they took no comfort in ceding first place in the annual smog derby to Los Angeles. They said they are tightening restrictions on air pollution in the Houston area, which largely stems from the cluster of oil refineries and chemical plants near the city.

"It's easy to say that we don't want to be No. 1 when it comes to smog. But we don't want to have the first-, the second- or the third-highest number of 'exceedences,'" said John Steib, deputy director in charge of enforcement and compliance for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Because the smog season tends to peak in summer and tail off after October, the totals for this time of year have traditionally been the final numbers.

LA smog creeps to worst in U.S.

in the Modesto Bee, from Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2005

By Miguel Bustillo, Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles is America's smog capital once again.

The megalopolis actually has had fewer smoggy days this year than last, continuing a relatively steady three-decade trend toward cleaner air. However, Houston and California's San Joaquin Valley, which in recent years rivaled and even surpassed L.A. as the smoggiest areas in the country, experienced exceptionally clean air this year.

As a result, the Greater Los Angeles region is again home to the worst smog in the nation, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency's latest barometer for measuring the unhealthful haze -- a dubious distinction the region has held for most of the last half-century.

Air quality in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties has exceeded the federal health standard for more than 2 1/2 months this year.

"It's a tough job cleaning up the ozone at this point because there are not a lot of easy emissions to target," said Joe Cassmassi, planning and rules manager for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the region's chief smog-fighting agency. "The low-hanging fruit, as a lot of people like to say, has been taken."

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Last year, the region exceeded the standard on 90 days, and in 2003, it surpassed it on 120 days. The standard limits airborne concentrations of smog, or ground-level ozone, to .08 parts per million over an eight-hour period.

By comparison, the San Joaquin Valley, which in recent years had been the nation's biggest violator of the eight-hour standard, exceeded it on just 72 days this year -- the fewest ever since regulators began recording smoggy days. The region surpassed the mark on 109 days last year and 134 days in 2003.

"We'd like to believe that public awareness of this issue has become so high in the valley that people are changing their behavior," said Kelly Hogan Malay, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. She said the weather in the San Joaquin Valley was unusually hot for parts of this year, which should have created more smog.

Because the smog season tends to peak in summer and tail off after October, the totals for this time of year have traditionally been the final numbers.

The EPA requires areas that exceed the smog standard to develop plans to reduce ozone-forming pollution. Regions have different deadlines to meet the standard, based on the severity of their smog problems. If Los Angeles still exceeds the standard by 2021, it risks losing federal transportation funding.

Before adopting the eight-hour smog standard this summer, the EPA's dirty air barometer was a measure that limited concentrations of ozone over a one-hour period.

Though the eight-hour baseline is generally seen as a more accurate measure of smog levels, critics condemned the agency for pushing back the compliance deadline, which had been 2010 for Los Angeles, when it switched standards, arguing that it removed pressure on local officials to clean the air or lose federal money.

EPA officials said last week that the criticism was unjustified, arguing that their new rules still called for areas with smog problems to continue trying to meet the old one-hour standard, even if the actual regulatory deadlines had changed.

If the one-hour standard were still used, Houston would have topped Los Angeles as the nation's smog capital. Houston violated the one-hour standard on 33 days this year, compared with 30 days in the L.A. region.

Texas officials said they took no comfort in ceding first place in the annual smog derby to Los Angeles. They said they are tightening restrictions on air pollution in the Houston area, which largely stems from the cluster of oil refineries and chemical plants near the city.

"It's easy to say that we don't want to be No. 1 when it comes to smog. But we don't want to have the first-, the second- or the third-highest number of 'exceedences,' " said John Steib, deputy director in charge of enforcement and compliance for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Region takes smog title

OZONE: Despite fewer unhealthy days than 2004, LA area surpasses the San Joaquin Valley.

By MICHAEL FISHER

The Press-Enterprise (serving Inland Southern California), Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2005

The Greater Los Angeles region, including much of Inland Southern California, reclaimed its title as the nation's smog leader this year, thanks in part to a new federal standard for measuring air quality.

Ozone levels in the South Coast Air Basin, which covers Orange County and the urbanized areas of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, exceeded federal smog standards on 84 days this year, according to preliminary data from the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

The San Joaquin Valley, the reigning national smog champ during the past two years, placed second, logging 72 unhealthy days during 2005.

"It's unfortunate we have regained that title but the numbers themselves show that we have improved," said Tina Cherry, spokeswoman for the AQMD.

Those figures show the number of unhealthy days recorded in the South Coast Air Basin have tumbled 60 percent since 1977 when the Los Angeles region suffered through 223 days of unhealthy air. Conditions in the Greater Los Angeles region exceeded federal standards on 90 days last year, and 111 days in 2000.

In recent years, the Greater Los Angeles region has vied against the San Joaquin Valley and Houston for the smog crown.

Last year, the federal Environmental Protection Agency adopted new standards that limit ozone levels to .085 parts-per-million averaged over eight hours. That replaced the EPA's former limit of .12 parts-per-million measured in one-hour blocks, a threshold that had been in place since 1979.

Under the old system, Houston would have narrowly beat Los Angeles as the nation's smog capital this year with 33 days exceeding the one-hour standard -- three more than the South Coast Air Basin.

"There is no pride on being lower than anyone else," said Terry Clawson, spokesman for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. "We are all working on knocking this ozone threat down."

Ozone is unhealthy to breathe, especially for people with respiratory diseases. It can cause nausea, headaches and fatigue, or trigger asthma attacks.

Ground-level ozone, a key ingredient in smog, is formed when volatile organic compounds and nitric oxides react chemically in sunlight. Nitric oxides are released in exhaust from cars, trucks, power plants and industrial facilities.

Smog season runs from May until October when the sunny, hot weather helps form ground-level ozone.

Since its creation 13 years ago, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has enacted rules to limit industrial and vehicle emissions in its region. The district is targeting the Central Valley's extensive

agricultural industry, but sweeping answers are getting harder to find, said spokeswoman Kelly Hogan Malay.

"We have all picked the low-hanging fruit and we are looking at smaller and smaller emissions reductions from the new rules we adopt," Malay said. "Just because we dropped to second place, that doesn't mean we are out of the woods."

Cherry said the South Coast Air Quality Management District continues to aggressively target ozone, but each new measure makes only a slight dent.

Earlier this month, the AQMD announced plans to cut emissions from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, deemed the region's top sources of air pollution.

Diesel engines on trucks, ships and trains at the ports generate 100 tons of smog- and particulate-forming nitrogen oxides each day. That's more than the daily emissions from all 6 million cars in the region, according to the AQMD.

UC gets \$8 million to study San Joaquin Valley's bad air

The Associated Press

Published in the San Francisco Chronicle and Fresno Bee, Monday, Nov. 14, 2005

The University of California, Davis, will receive an \$8 million federal grant to study the effects of one of the country's most polluted air basins on public health.

The Environmental Protection Agency was expected to announce the grant Tuesday.

The money will pay for a research center at the university to focus on pollution in the San Joaquin Valley from microscopic particles that become lodged in the lungs. The particles usually come from smoke, soot and fine dust, making them different from smog.

Results from the new center's studies could help find ways to reduce pollution, figure out who is more susceptible to sickness from it and even set new standards, said Lisa Fasano, an EPA spokeswoman.

"We're talking about a very serious pollutant. It makes many health problems worse, especially upper respiratory," she said.

Pollution from the fine particles, at its worst during the winter, has been said to cause everything from asthma to strokes over time.

Hidden cost in wood burning: Pollution

By Traci Watson

USA TODAY, Monday, Nov. 14, 2005

As soaring prices for oil and natural gas drive more Americans toward alternative fuels to stay warm this winter, environmental watchdogs are awakening to the unhealthy effects of the pollution from burning wood in the home.

Scientists have long known that wood smoke contains carbon monoxide and cancer-causing chemicals. But research shows that wood smoke's major ingredient -- tiny particles of soot and liquid pollution -- worsens heart disease and triggers asthma attacks.

This "particle pollution," also emitted by diesel engines, kills thousands of Americans a year. Alarmed by such findings, and required by federal law to cut particle pollution, officials across the USA are trying to reduce the smoke from the nation's 37 million home chimneys and 10 million wood stoves.

Locales from Darrington, Wash. (pop. 1,500), to the greater Pittsburgh area are dangling incentives to anyone who junks a wood stove more than 13 years old. Some California towns are asking residents to forgo fires on highly polluted days. And seven Northern states want a federal crackdown on the latest wrinkle in wood power: heating systems that rely on water warmed by burning wood.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that wood stoves are responsible for 5% of the smallest, deadliest particles emitted in the USA. That's not much, but many big industrial sources of particles are

already working to clean up their emissions. As other sources cut back, "residential wood smoke becomes a very important source of (particle) pollution," says Bill Wehrum, the EPA's top air pollution official.

Economics are driving more Americans to wood, however. The U.S. Energy Information Administration predicted last month that Americans who heat their homes with natural gas will pay nearly 50% more this winter, while heating-oil users face a 32% rise.

The result: fat times for those who sell wood-burning appliances. Some pellet stoves, which burn nuggets of dried wood, are back-ordered 90 days, says John Crouch of the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association. Wood-stove dealer Stephen Magnotti of Pittsburgh says customers face five-week waits for a new model. And then there's the fuel.

"We've seen firewood prices go up, and that's if you can find firewood," says Jasen Stock, director of the New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association.

The return to wood-burning stoves could be especially bad news for the 200-plus counties where levels of particle pollution are higher than federal safety limits, such as Washoe County, Nevada, home to Reno.

Susie Kapahee of the county's air quality management district says she is "a little concerned" that particle pollution may be up because of higher fuel prices.

Kapahee and other environmental officials don't worry much about new stoves, which boast either catalytic converters or combustion chambers designed to minimize soot. But a wood stove sold before stiffer regulations took effect in 1992 can emit as much pollution as seven diesel buses, says Guillermo Cole of the Allegheny County, Pa., Health Department.

Such older models account for three-quarters of the nation's wood stoves.

A new wood appliance is also drawing complaints. Known as an outdoor wood boiler, it's a shed where a wood fire heats water. Pipes carry the water into the home for heat and hot water.

More than 75,000 boilers, which have no pollution filters, have been sold nationally since 1999, according to the New York Attorney General's Office. The smoke can be so thick that those living nearby, such as David Cole of Etna, N.H., must take extreme measures.

On some warm nights, "you have to go around the house closing the windows," he says. This summer, he paid a neighbor's hot-water bill to get the man to stop using his boiler.

The broader wood smoke pollution problem becomes acute in winter. In some communities, mostly in the West, 30% to 80% of the wintertime particle pollution is attributed to wood burning in the home, regional and federal agencies say.

Some measures officials are taking:

- Mill Valley, Calif., recently banned the use of wood-burning appliances when air quality is bad. Other cities nearby have similar ordinances.
- The attorneys general of Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York and Vermont petitioned the EPA in August to set limits on emissions from outdoor wood boilers. Vermont has proposed its own limits.
- Funded by the EPA and industry, stores in southwestern Pennsylvania offer discounts for replacing fireplaces or wood stoves with new, cleaner models.

The high cost of heating oil drove Traci and Duane Eger of North Fayette, Pa., to use the discount to replace their fireplace with a new wood stove.

"It's an incredible amount of heat," says Duane, yet "there's no color to the smoke that comes out, because virtually everything ends up being burned."

The only hitch, he says: "We'll have to explain how Santa can make it through this device."

Regulators Push for Mercury Pollution Cuts

By JOHN HEILPRIN, The Associated Press

Published in the Washington Post, Monday, Nov. 14, 2005; 7:46 PM

WASHINGTON -- State and local air regulators unhappy with the Bush administration's approach to mercury pollution offered a competing plan Monday that would require coal-burning power plants to cut mercury emissions more deeply and more quickly and would raise home electric bills throughout the East and Midwest about a dollar a month.

Their plan would require utilities to reduce their combined 48 tons a year of mercury pollution by 80 percent by 2008, and by 90 percent to 95 percent by 2012. It relies on state-of-the-art technologies such as injectors that feed activated carbon dust into the exhaust vents. The carbon attracts mercury particles, which are filtered out.

Forty percent of all U.S. mercury pollution comes from coal-fired power plants. Mercury, a neurotoxin, concentrates in fish and poses the greatest risk of nerve damage to pregnant women, women of childbearing age and young children.

A new rule adopted by the Environmental Protection Agency in March set a nationwide cap on mercury pollution and put a ceiling on allowable pollution for each state starting in 2010.

The agency said it aimed to cut mercury pollution by 70 percent by 2018, but lets individual plants avoid cleanups by buying pollution allowances from plants well under the allowable limits. As a result, the EPA estimated, utilities could realistically be expected to cut their mercury pollution in half by 2020, down to 24.3 tons. Deeper cuts would take a few more years. The EPA estimated its plan would cost utilities and users of electricity \$750 million a year by 2020.

The twin trade groups for the State and Territorial Air Pollution Program Administrators and the Association of Local Air Pollution Control Officials said their "model rule" for states to adopt would add \$1 a month to the average household's utility bills. But they said they lacked a national cost estimate for their plan.

States can adopt their own plans for reducing mercury pollution as long as they surpass federal standards.

"The public is willing to pay the cost of a lunch at McDonald's in order to ensure that the fish they eat is free from mercury," said Bill Becker, the groups' executive director.

"We don't need Congress' permission. We don't need EPA's permission. These are tools states and localities can use," Becker said. "Given the amount of extreme disappointment and concern with EPA's rule, the states are telling us they're very confident they will adopt many of these provisions."

The Bush administration has repeatedly argued that requiring all or most plants to install the latest technology controls is too costly.

"EPA believes its cap-and-trade rule is the best approach to protect public health by reducing mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants while maintaining fuel diversity and energy security," agency spokeswoman Eryn Witcher said Monday.

Witcher said the air regulators' model rule "could potentially shift large segments of the nation's generating capacity from coal to natural gas if it were adopted in a significant number of key electricity-generating states. Such a shift could result in increased natural gas prices to consumers due to supply shortages."

David Foerter, executive director of the Institute for Clean Air Companies, whose members make the controls and monitoring systems, said the air regulators' plan "better reflects the capabilities of mercury control technologies" than the EPA's approach.

John Paul, president of the local regulators' trade group and supervisor of a Dayton, Ohio-based regional air pollution control agency, said the EPA had ignored an expert panel's conclusion that tougher controls were needed.

Scott Segal, director of the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council, which represents electric utilities, said the air regulators' plan was unwise.

On the Net:

Air regulators: <http://www.4cleanair.org/>

[Tracy Press, Editorial, Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2005:](#)

Valley takes a cleaner breath

Valley residents are breathing easier today. The San Joaquin Valley, from Lodi to Bakersfield, no longer is considered the smoggiest in the nation.

This dubious distinction returned to the greater Los Angeles area after this year's final set of ozone measurements. Air quality in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties exceeded the federal eight-hour health standard for 84 days this year.

The San Joaquin Valley violated the Environmental Protection Agency standard 72 days. This was a considerable improvement from 109 days in 2004 and 134 days in 2003.

How has the eight-county valley district cut the number of smoggy days nearly in half in two years? It's an awareness of residents and businesses about the dirty air and their participation in programs not to only "spare the air," but also to clean it up.

Geography, climate and wind conditions are major factors that prevent the valley from ever having the cleanest air.

But we are making use of the other variables: public transportation; telecommuting and new technologies, and grants and incentives for industry and agriculture to improve what we breathe. The motivation is human survival, since 239,000 of San Joaquin County's 633,000 residents with asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, diabetes and cardiovascular disease are at risk every smoggy day.

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2005:](#)

Be smart about our growth

Growth can be positive for a community -- that is if growth is shaped to benefit the community and not just a few developers hoping to make a quick buck. Kern County supervisors can take a modest, prudent step today to help shape growth in metropolitan Bakersfield to benefit all of us -- not just a few who seek to build homes and businesses on the outskirts of metropolitan Bakersfield where public services are being stretched, groundwater is being polluted and prime agricultural land devoured.

After months of public workshops and hearings before the county's Planning Commission, supervisors will consider an ordinance requiring homes and businesses built in metropolitan Bakersfield to be hooked to sewer systems.

Current county policy allows single-family homes built on lots larger than 10,000 square feet to install septic systems and dry sewer lines -- lines that eventually can be hooked up to sewer systems.

But hookup often does not occur. Sewage and industrial wastes dumped into an increasing number of septic tanks in the county areas of metropolitan Bakersfield are polluting the groundwater. That's water we all rely on for drinking.

The proposed policy will require new commercial, industrial and residential land divisions creating residential parcels smaller than three gross acres to connect to a public sewer or an acceptable alternative community sewage treatment system.

Allowing septic tanks to provide essential sewer service also enables premature growth onto prime agricultural land. This growth stretches our already stretched urban services, such as roads, and law enforcement and fire protection.

If you tether development to the existence of urban services, such as sewer, you have a practical way of keeping sprawl under control.

When county planning commissioners considered the rule change and recommended supervisors adopt it, they called it a "smart growth" strategy.

To protect our quality of life -- and that includes [the quality of our air](#) and the economical use of our tax dollars to provide local government services -- city and county officials must be smart in their growth strategies.

Yielding to those whose interests rest more with making a profit regardless of the consequences is not smart growth. It is not responsible leadership.

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2005:](#)

Name dump for Thomas

As U.S. citizens we don't have a king or dictator that we bow down to. We are supposed to be a self-governing democracy, specifically, a republic with representatives to represent us, the citizens, of this great country.

Who has Bill Thomas been representing in his many, many years of public service? Surely not farmworkers who live in third-world poverty here in Kern County or schoolteachers and union members -- as Thomas did before he went to Washington, D.C., and was corrupted by power, big money and big politics. Thomas feeds Kern County a few federal dollars to buy our votes so he can stay in Washington, D.C., and serve his billionaire masters.

Kern County lives everyday with farm worker poverty, homelessness, children living in poverty, under-funded schools and some of [the worst air quality in the nation](#) -- and, can you believe, hazardous waste dumps and sewage dumps. The only things growing in Kern County are the prison populations and millionaire tax-free salaries and corporate tax-free profits.

There is plenty of money in Kern County. Thomas just makes sure the people don't get any of it. Thomas wants lower minimum wages (the illegal aliens already work for nothing), lower health-care benefits and lower living conditions for American workers.

Remember, we are in competition with third-world workers now. Instead of naming our airport terminal after Bill Thomas, we should name one of our prisons or one of our dumps after him.

-- RICHARD S. MARA, Bakersfield