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FAIL: the Lung Association's air quality ratings

By Lois Henry, Californian Columnist

To all you people out there with your hair on fire because the American Lung Association ahhhgain gave our air an "F," please, douse yourselves and think for a minute.

The truth is the nation's air quality overall has improved vastly in the years since the ALA began looking at air pollution data more than 13 years ago.

So if Bakersfield has the worst air in the nation, yet we've all improved dramatically, what does this grade really mean?

On it's face -- nothing.

Even when you get into the nitty gritty, the grades aren't helpful to understanding where our air is and how far we need to go for real health-based improvement.

They are judging our air based on how often we exceed national standards for ozone and long- and short-term particulate matter.

What they don't include in their calculations, however, is that those national standards have been lowered at least once for particulate matter and twice for ozone since they started gathering air data.

And our air is still considered unhealthy in the Lung Association's view even though the number days we exceed those ever more stringent standards have decreased over the years.

To put that another way, it's the same as if your teacher told you 70 percent was good enough for a C one day and the next day said you had to get 85 for a C. Even if you did better than 70, if you didn't hit 85, you'd still get an F.

"The other thing that makes this report totally useless is the fact that it gives areas such as ours, Santa Barbara, Shasta, Tahoe, San Luis Obispo all Fs," said Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "That doesn't pass the straight-face test."

That happens because the Lung Association gives so much weight to exceedence days, Sadredin said. So an entire county can be tagged a "failure" because one air monitoring station went over one standard for several hours on one day.

It's not a comprehensive look, Sadredin said.

I asked Bonnie Holmes-Gen, the Lung Association's California director for air quality and health, about those failing grades for places that otherwise seem to have pristine air.

She said the Lung Association doesn't just look at monitoring stations. They also count up the unhealthy days in each county, based on the EPAs "air quality index," then weights them based on the severity of how unhealthy each day was and averages them over three years.

If that's true, then why does it appear San Luis Obispo County was given an F based on one monitoring station on the San Joaquin Valley side of the Temblor Range, many miles and hills away from the cool ocean breezes that keeps the rest of that county nice and fresh?

Holmes-Gen conceded that monitor likely tipped SLO into failure. But she insisted that was a valid grade since the unhealthy air at that monitor isn't boxed in there. It moves around and so do people.

"If the air is unhealthy, we're giving it an F," she said.

Uh huh.

The other monitors in SLO didn't pick up the same levels of bad air, which would suggest there was no bad air in those other spots. Hence, the naughty air was most likely local to that one monitor. So I still don't see how the whole county fails.

Which says to me that these grades are pure flim flam.

Holmes-Gen and I also had to agree to disagree on what the Lung Association leaves out of its report card.

Such as, how many tons of emissions are removed from our air each year.

"They say Bakersfield is worst for air quality but if they ranked us on emissions reduced, we'd be No. 1," Sadredin said.

Holmes-Gen said the Lung Association grades strictly on whether it believes the air is unhealthy. No "As" for effort.

They do recognize that strides have been made, she said, and tried to highlight that in this report.

"It's important for the public to understand that all the regulations and investments we've made here have not been in vain."

I'm not sure how repeated and undeserved "Fs" convey that. Reminds me of the old office joke: "Beatings will continue until morale improves."

Anyhoo, the only thing in the Lung Association's report card that comes close to noting our successes were air quality trend numbers from the EPA showing that, from 2001 to 2010, ozone had been reduced by 13 percent, year round particle pollution dropped 24 percent and short term particle pollution dropped 28 percent.

OK, but how 'bout these numbers:

For ozone, the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had three days of exceedences in 2011, down from 56 days in 1996 and 30 in 2002.

And just in Kern County – the worst air in the nation – if the Lung Association had looked at good days versus unhealthy days, they would have seen a heartening reversal.

Back in 2000, the ratio was 96 good to 63 unhealthy. In 2011 that was 137 good to 11 unhealthy.

The reality is our air is improving. (And it's not killing us, though that's a story for another time!)

Look, the Lung Association is an advocacy group and I understand that.

But this report card is obviously more about fund raising through fear than providing an honest, thorough view of air quality.

And for that, I give the Lung Association a big fat "F-."

San Joaquin Railroad getting four low-emission locomotives

Central Valley Business Times, Thursday, April 26, 2012

Progress Rail Services Corporation, of Albertville, Ala., a wholly-owned subsidiary of Caterpillar Inc. (NYSE: CAT), has reached an agreement with the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, a RailAmerica subsidiary in the Central Valley, to supply four repowered, low-emissions PR30B locomotives.

Progress Rail will repower the 4-axle, GP-type locomotives with Caterpillar 3516C-HD engines rated at 2,995 bhp and equipped with exhaust aftertreatment technology verified by the California Air Resources Board to achieve the equivalent of U.S. EPA Tier 4 line-haul emissions levels.

The locomotives, which will operate in the San Joaquin Valley, will be equipped with a combination diesel oxidation catalyst/selective catalytic reduction emissions aftertreatment system that Progress says will significantly reduce emissions of nitrogen oxide and particulate matter.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is paying 85 percent in funding incentives for a total grant award of \$7.1 million.

Compared to the former San Joaquin fleet, each new locomotive will be able to operate approximately 20 days while producing the same emissions in that time period as one of the former locomotives would have generated in a single day of operation.

"The San Joaquin Valley has some of the worst air quality in the nation, and incentivizing innovative technology, such as these locomotives, into the valley is a key strategy in improving our air quality," says Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"We are very pleased to partner with Progress Rail on our initial commitment to this type of eco-friendly locomotive for the San Joaquin Valley Railroad," says Scott Linn, a vice president of Rail America.

San Joaquin Valley Railroad operates 417 miles of track in the Central Valley with interchanges with the Union Pacific railroad at Fresno, Goshen Junction and Bakersfield, and with the Burlington Northern Santa Fe at Fresno and Bakersfield.

Local educators and groups raise awareness about asthma

By Juan Villa

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, April 30, 2012

For the sixth straight year, the message for the estimated 300 million people who suffer from asthma worldwide is the same, you can control your asthma.

That's the theme of the World Asthma Day 2012, which is organized by the Global Initiative for Asthma and taking place Tuesday around the world. The entire month of May is Asthma Awareness Month.

Locally, several asthma educators and health care groups are doing their part to raise awareness about the serious lung disease.

Raising the flag

The fifth-grade flag crew at Royal Oaks Elementary School had a little extra jump in their step Thursday morning after seeing the color of the flag they were raising.

The green flag, which is a part of the free, school-based Air Quality Flag Program, meant it's a good day to play outside.

"Since it's green today, the kids are going to be excited," said Jean Burress, whose fifth-grade classes have raised the flags every morning for more than 20 years. "We always joke and say they should hold their breath on bad air days."

Burress' class began raising the air quality flags after the program began in 2004. Previously they had only raised the American and California flags.

While the Thursday flag crew didn't include anybody with asthma, Visalia Unified School District Lead Nurse Suzie Skadan said there are currently about 1,300 students that have been identified as having asthmatic-type symptoms within the district.

"We track student health conditions to make sure they're safe," Skadan said. "We have a high number of asthma cases because of the air quality in the Valley. Most of them are well controlled, they take their medication and function just fine."

Each afternoon, the Valley Air District sends out a message to participating schools to let them know the next days forecast. The forecast is turned into a color system know as the Air Quality Index.

The four colors are green, yellow, orange and red.

- Green — Good (Air Quality Index 0-50). It's OK to play or work outside.
- Yellow — Moderate (AQI 51-100). It's OK to play and work outside but people who are very sensitive to dirty air should limit outdoor activity.
- Orange — Unhealthy for sensitive groups (AQI 101-150). The air isn't healthy for people with asthma or heart disease. They should limit outdoor activity and play or exercise indoors.

- Red — Unhealthy for all groups (AQI 151-200) The air isn't healthy for anyone. Limit outdoor activity, play or exercise indoors, close windows and use the air conditioner.

"All of the teachers are aware of what the flags mean," Skadan said. "The students with asthma are specially aware, they kind of judge for themselves if they might need their inhaler."

The United States Environmental Protection Agency says that more than 10.5 million days of school are missed every year because of asthma.

As of 2011, more than 700 schools in the Valley were involved in the flag program. In Tulare County there were 86 schools.

Information is power

The Tulare County Asthma Coalition will have information tables around the county Tuesday.

"We're going to have information on how to cope with your asthma and tell you what are some possible triggers," said June Sexton of the TCAC. "We're also having coloring books to understand asthma better and we do almost everything in English and Spanish."

Locations with information tables include:

- The Tulare Community Health Clinic
- Kaweah Delta Health Care District locations in Lindsay, Exeter and Woodlake
- Family HealthCare Network locations in Cutler-Orosi, Hanford, Woodlake and Porterville and Visalia

The Visalia location of the Family HealthCare Network on East Oak Avenue will have asthma and spirometry screenings by Dr. Lauren Hiyama of Boz Allergy, Asthma and Sinus Center from 9-11 a.m.

On Saturday will be Train the Trainer, a free seminar and workshop about asthma education organized by the TCAC. It's taking place at San Joaquin Valley College.

"We teach what asthma is, what causes it, what you could do for it," Sexton said. "We'll have workshops on how to use inhalers so they can take care of their child or someone that comes into the doctors office where they work."

One of the most common problems TCAC members see is the lack of asthma knowledge, especially when it comes to medication.

"That's the problem we run into, they haven't gone to the right doctor to get the right medicine and they're not using it properly when they have it," Sexton said.

The five hour class is for anyone interested in learning more about asthma.

Sexton offered three tips for Tulare County residents suffering from asthma.

Use medication properly

If medication has been prescribed by a doctor, use it as he prescribed.

"That's the biggest thing, they're never using it the way they should," Sexton said. "We ask how often they're using it and they're not doing it like they should, we try and tell them how to do it and how often."

Learn and avoid triggers

Everybody with asthma generally has at least one trigger that will set them off.

"If it happens every spring it tells you it's probably pollens. Which one in particular? It may not matter," Sexton said. "Just know you need to start taking medication before everything starts blooming and until after the season to keep it under control."

Know the air quality

The daily air quality forecast can be found for Tulare County on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District website at www.valleyair.org. The next day's forecast is available after 4:30 p.m. each day.

Colorful flags from the Air Quality Flag Program can also be seen flying at schools in Tulare County every morning.

"That's why we have those flag programs, if it's bad air quality you shouldn't be outside playing at that time. Pay attention to air quality and avoid heavy outdoor exertion when the air quality is poor," Sexton said. "I'm all for kids being outside and playing all day long, but just pay attention to the air quality."

Bike to school

At Redwood High School, Steve Sanders and his Cycling Club are doing their part to help keep vehicles off the road to minimize the pollution they cause.

They're organizing Bike to School Day on May 17 as part of Bike to Work Week in Visalia. Sanders, club adviser and a history teacher, is part of the City of Visalia Waterways and Trails Committee, which is helping organize the week's events. He mentioned the idea to his club and they liked it.

"We wanted to promote riding your bike to school instead of driving," he said. "We have some incentives for kids who are going to ride their bikes."

They have also partnered with Mt. Whitney, El Diamante and Golden West high schools. Ideally, organizers would like 100 students at each location riding their bike to school but they aren't sure if that's a realistic goal because it's the first year they've organized the ride.

The Healthy Air Living program of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the Lifestyle Center and Sierra Bicycle Works have provided things like water bottles and T-shirts for participants.

"We're hoping to get people on their bikes," Sanders said. "In high school they're pretty much looking forward to driving so we're trying to change that attitude a little bit with kids getting on their bikes and riding a little more."

Little improvement seen in valley air quality

Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Saturday, April 28, 2012

The 13th annual air quality report from the American Lung Association has good and bad news for the San Joaquin Valley — but it's still mostly bad.

Visalia, Bakersfield, Fresno and Hanford are among the five most ozone-polluted cities in the country, the Lung Association reported this week. Only the Los Angeles area is worse. The message has been consistent for years.

Modesto barely skirted the top 10 list, ranking 11th for high ozone days out of 277 U.S. metropolitan areas.

But the report also says this: Unhealthy ozone days have decreased by about 50 percent in Modesto in the past decade.

In the Fresno area, they dropped more than 60 percent, according to the association's figures.

The report continues to place several valley cities among the nation's worst 10 for both ozone and tiny debris called particulate matter pollution. This pollution is produced by things such as diesel trucks, agricultural equipment, firewood smoke and wildfires.

Modesto ranked fifth in short-term particle pollution, a jump from 12th in the previous year's report.

Short-term particle pollution is measured by one-day spikes rather than annual particulate levels that are averaged.

Lung Association official Will Barrett said the spike is mostly attributed to the installation of a new monitor that tracks the pollution daily rather than every three days, as it had in previous years.

California is the worst place in the country for air pollution, said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, executive director for air quality and health of the American Lung Association in California. There are lots of challenges ahead, she said.

Still, many cities had their cleanest showing ever in the lung association's rankings, Holmes-Gen said.

"Los Angeles, Visalia, Bakersfield, Sacramento, El Centro and San Diego had their lowest number of unhealthy days for ozone," she said.

At the same time, Stanislaus, Fresno, Kings and Madera counties had more bad ozone days than they did in the 2011 report.

Plenty of sources add to pollution

The Lung Association looks at air data in three-year intervals. The 2012 report is based on monitor readings from 2008 through 2010, the latest official readings available.

The report mentions the big pollution sources for the San Joaquin Valley and California. They include diesel trucks, cars, ships, locomotives, oil refineries, agriculture and wood burning in fireplaces.

The pollution contributes to thousands of hospitalizations, emergency room visits and deaths each year, said Dr. Kari Nadeau, an immunology and allergy expert from Stanford University.

"Air pollution can stunt the lung development of children and cause health emergencies," she said.

"Cleaner air can save lives and can lead to better lives for our children."

To read the report, go to www.lung.org/associations/states/california and click on "State of the Air."

BAD AIR

The smoggiest areas in the United States:

- 1. Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside
- 2. Visalia-Porterville
- 3. Bakersfield-Delano
- 4. Fresno-Madera
- 5. Hanford-Corcoran
- 6. Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Yuba City
- 7. San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos
- 8. Houston-Baytown-Huntsville, Texas
- 9. San Luis Obispo-Paso Robles
- 10. Merced

Source: American Lung Association