

Sacramento Bee Editorial

By the Editorial Board

May 1, 2014

There's no shortage of ideas on how to spend California's anticipated "cap and trade" billions.

But two recent reports lay out a compelling case for where a serious dose of that money, from the state's program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, needs to go.

Last week, in an eye-opening map of communities most wracked by pollution, the California Environmental Protection Agency left no doubt that the Central Valley is by far the state's biggest and most vulnerable environmental challenge.

Color-coded from green to hazardous red to pinpoint areas with the greatest exposure to contaminated air, soil and water, the CalEnviroScreen map featured a big, crimson welt at the state's very core, festering from West Sacramento to Bakersfield.

The California EPA data looked at environmental risks and human demographics. By any measure, however, it was clear that the region's longstanding problems are shortening millions of lives.

In the worst tract, 3,000 men, women and children in West Fresno were breathing exhaust from three freeways, fumes from a rendering plant and a meat-processing plant, and tending fields that ranked in the 90th percentile for pesticide applications.

Conditions weren't much healthier in the surrounding counties, a point driven home by the second study, released Wednesday by the American Lung Association.

That report, which focused on levels of particulates and ozone, found that for the third year in a row, the Central Valley had the most polluted air in the nation, and that wasn't even counting the later months of last year, when air quality plummeted amid winter heat waves and drought.

Fresno, with its sooty air, had more particulates than any other American city, with Visalia-Porterville-Hanford and Bakersfield right behind it.

Certainly, the Central Valley's topography and climate pose a challenge. Surrounded by mountains, the region is a hot, massive sink that traps pollution and bakes it.

But more can surely be done about the man-made parts of its problems – the old fleets of farm equipment, the big-rig exhaust from Highway 99 and Interstate 5, the agribusiness pollution, the reliance on gas guzzlers.

Though California has so many electric vehicles now that the state has had to look at narrowing the requirements for the \$2,500 rebates it offers, only 2 percent of those rebates have gone to owners of San Joaquin Valley cars.

The cap-and-trade fees California hopes to collect from factories, food processors, oil companies and other big polluters could make a difference. By law, a quarter of that money must go to "disadvantaged" communities.

As lawmakers debate grand plans, from high-speed rail to transit-oriented housing, they should keep in mind that the real bang for the buck will be in the geographic focus of these projects.

A pollution-steeped red zone with asthma rates that are triple the national average shouldn't be the future of our state.

Morning dust storm in Kern delays traffic

By Ruth Brown

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 1, 2014

Karen Briltz was terrified Wednesday morning about trying to drive through a dust storm that left her little to no visibility along Stockdale Highway.

So she sat in her car about three miles west of Allen Road. Waiting. For an hour.

Briltz, 48, had pulled over because she couldn't see the road. Neither could many other drivers, who also idled on the side of the highway.

"I've never been more scared in my life," she said. "I keep thinking (the dust is) going to stop but it doesn't."

Drivers on Interstate 5 from Stockdale Highway to Bear Mountain Boulevard and other parts of Kern County also had low visibility during the late morning dust storm that reached gusts of up to 35 mph in the Bakersfield area.

Poor visibility was reported throughout the San Joaquin Valley from blowing dust.

Such dust storms are uncommon this time of year, said David Spector, forecaster for the San Joaquin Valley National Weather Service.

"A lot of it has to do with the lack of precipitation," Spector said.

Thursday also will bring strong winds, but not as severe as Wednesday's.

Neither Bakersfield police nor California Highway Patrol reported any accidents from the dust storm.

But Briltz, who was traveling from Templeton to Bakersfield, said she couldn't believe some people kept driving during the storm.

"People are driving like crazy out here. I thought (a) truck was going to hit me," she said. "I called 911 trying to get a highway patrolman out here."

California cities dominate dirty-air rankings

The Business Journal, Thursday, May 1, 2014

(AP) — Cities in California's Central Valley dominate the American Lung Association's annual rankings of the nation's worst air pollution, though traditional dirty-air leader Los Angeles still tops key categories.

The report released Wednesday says California cities have cleared their air and seriously reduced pollution in recent decades, but still lag behind the rest of the country in cleanliness.

Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield rank 1-2-3 in the country for short-term spikes in fine particle pollution, with Los Angeles fourth.

LA is still on top in one category, violating federal standards for ozone in the air 122 days a year.

The Central Valley and the Los Angeles Basin have stagnant weather and a bowl shape make smog-cutting especially challenging.

The rankings came in the Lung Association's 15th annual "State of the Air" report

Court orders EPA to adopt new air pollution rule

LA Times and other papers, Thursday, May 1, 2014

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A federal court has given the Obama administration a deadline for updating federal standards for smog that are more than a year overdue.

U.S. District Court Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers in San Francisco on Tuesday ordered the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to issue ground-level ozone standards by Dec. 1 and a final rule by Oct. 1, 2015.

"EPA will meet the deadlines outlined by the court," Liz Purchia, an agency spokeswoman, said in an emailed statement. "However, the deadlines present a challenge for the agency because there is a significant amount of scientific analysis and review required."

Ozone is the main ingredient in smog, a powerful lung irritant.

At ground-level, ozone is created when emissions from cars and industrial facilities mix with sunlight to create smog.

The court ruling came after environmental groups sued the Obama administration for failing to issue a new standard by March 2013, as required by the federal Clean Air Act.

The last ozone standards were adopted by former President George W. Bush in 2008. Environmental groups had sued the agency then to strengthen the rules, and the Obama administration had vowed to do so.

In 2010, then-EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson proposed tightening the standards, as agency scientific advisers recommended, only to have them tabled by the White House. Businesses and congressional Republicans said the rules would hurt the economy.

Paul Cort, an attorney for the environmental groups who sued, applauded the ruling, saying new standards will improve public health.

"The court's decision today will finally put an end to EPA's foot-dragging on these important health standards," Cort, an attorney for Earthjustice, said in a statement.

County fails air report — again

By Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Wednesday, April 30, 2014

It's an "F" again for San Joaquin County when it comes to air quality - the same grade our community typically receives from the American Lung Association in its annual "State of the Air" reports.

Lung association officials stressed Tuesday that the air is getting cleaner in many parts of the country. But they said millions of Californians are still at risk, with the most serious pollution hot spots in the San Joaquin Valley, particularly south of Stockton.

"More than 80 percent of all Californians live in areas battling unhealthy air," said Marsha Ramos, chairwoman of the association's California branch.

There is good news for our region: Stockton dropped off a list of the top 25 cities in the country most vulnerable to pollution from tiny particles in the air for 2010-12. Last year, the city ranked 12th on that list, its worst showing.

The bad news is, San Joaquin County's population as a whole is still considered to be highly vulnerable to the particles, ranking 16th in the United States. The ranking is based on the number of residents who are considered at risk, including the young and elderly, those who suffer from asthma or other respiratory illnesses, and those who live in poverty.

Overall, the county earned "F" grades for both major types of pollution: summertime ozone, and wintertime particle pollution.

Despite being almost twice as clean as San Joaquin, Calaveras County also earned an "F" for ozone. That underscores concerns among some air quality regulators that the lung association's annual study, while helpful, sometimes paints an overly simplistic picture, lumping dirty counties in with cleaner ones.

Indeed, a pre-emptive report issued one week earlier by an association of air quality districts across California emphasized improvements made over time, saying that despite an increase in population and traffic, smog-forming pollutants in the state have declined by more than 50 percent.

Report: Progress made towards clean air

Climate change bad news for Valley

By Sabra Stafford

Turlock Journal, Tuesday, April 29, 2014

Overall the quality of air Californians have been breathing has seen a marked improvement in the last few years, but air pollution officials are concerned the effects of climate change could negate all the strides made, according to a new report from the California Air Pollution Control Officers' Association.

The effects of climate change could be especially troublesome for the San Joaquin Valley, which continues to rank in the bottom of the state for clean air.

The report from CAPCOA, which represents the state's 35 air districts, states there has been "an ongoing trend of air quality improvements across the state," especially at a time when the population and number of miles driven has increased.

"Although the progress toward clean air has been quite remarkable, the quest for clean air continues," the report states. "The challenges ahead seem daunting in our motor vehicle-driven society. Examples of the motor vehicle problem exist in the two most severely polluted regions in the state and nation — the San Joaquin Valley (an area with low population density and high traffic volumes) and the South Coast air basin (high population density and high traffic volumes). While these areas have made tremendous strides in improving air quality they are far from meeting state and federal air quality standards."

While still singled out for poor air quality, the San Joaquin Valley did reach some major milestones in 2013. For the first time in recorded history, the San Joaquin Valley in 2013 had zero violations of the hourly ozone standard established under the Federal Clean Air Act, down from 281 individual hours exceeding the standard in 1996. In 2004, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency classified the Valley as "Extreme" non-attainment for this standard, meaning that reaching the standard, at that time, was deemed impossible. The San Joaquin Valley is the first and only region in the nation with "Extreme" classification to attain the standard.

Over the past two decades the San Joaquin Valley Air District has implemented more than 500 rules and regulations to help reach the federal standard, like the Check Before You Burn program, as well as giving out millions of dollars in incentive programs, such as switching to electric mowers.

For all of this though the Valley air basin still faces major air pollution challenges, especially as the effects of climate change take hold.

"Climate change and associated extreme weather events have the potential to set back air quality improvements made over decades as local and regional air quality are expected to suffer from a greater number of extreme heat days and increases in wildfires and their intensity," the report states.

According to a study conducted by Stanford University, climate change may have contributed to this past year's unusual winter conditions and resulting poor air quality days. The winter of 2013 was the driest year on record in California and with it came prolonged periods of air stagnation. Over the winter, the San Joaquin Valley recorded 38 days of particulate matter exceeding the federal standards, making it one of the highest rates in the state.

County near top of national polluted air list

Written by Juan Villa

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, May 1, 2014

Tulare County is getting closer to having the unhealthiest air in the nation, according to a report released Wednesday by the American Lung Association.

It's our neighbors to the north, the Fresno-Madera area, which ranked as the most polluted for year-round particle pollution, known as PM-2.5.

It means San Joaquin Valley residents are inhaling soot and other tiny pollutants at unmatched levels.

Just a year ago, the Visalia-Porterville-Hanford area was seventh on the list for worst air.

The Lung Association's 179-page "State of the Air" report lists both the cleanest and most polluted areas in the nation and also shows that air pollution continues to put lives at risk throughout the San Joaquin Valley, said Dr. Praveen Buddiga, an asthma and allergy specialist and volunteer physician with the American Lung Association in California.

The Visalia-Porterville-Hanford area is also the second worse when it comes to ozone pollution, behind the Los Angeles-Long Beach area.

Buddiga said ozone can cause problems including headaches, nausea and inflammation in people's airways. Particle pollution can cause inflammation of the lungs.

If someone understands air quality issues in the Valley, it's Buddiga, who works in five of the eight Valley counties that received failing grades for ozone pollution, including Tulare County.

"San Joaquin Valley remains home to some of the most polluted air in the country, and that means millions of residents are at a greater risk for lung cancer, asthma attacks, heart attacks and premature deaths," said Buddiga, who works at Baz Allergy, Asthma and Sinus Center in Visalia.

Buddiga said the San Joaquin Valley is unfortunately at a disadvantage because of the terrain. The Valley's bowl shape and the Sierra Nevada to the east cause the pollutants coming from the Bay Area and the coast to remain stagnant in the Valley.

The 15th annual report showed the nation's air quality worsened between 2010 and 2012 — the years the report focused on — but remains cleaner than just a decade ago. It looked at levels of particle pollution and ozone coming from monitoring sites across the nation.

As more monitoring sites are added, it could skew the data a bit, said Buddiga. The Fresno-Madera area recently had more monitors installed.

The Visalia-Porterville-Hanford area isn't alone when it comes to bad air quality; according to the report, nearly half of the nation had unhealthy air quality from 2010-12.

"I wouldn't out this report as something to be alarmed about, but it's something we need to be aware of and what can we do about it?" Buddiga said. "We can take our medication, prevent using wood stoves, try to get our cars tuned in time so they don't emit pollution. Those are some of the things we can do. Even one person helps."

The study doesn't include 2013, whose statewide drought could show spikes in the next study.

Report: Merced air still bad, but improving

By Ana B. Ibarra

Sacramento Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, Apr. 30, 2014

Local air officials on Wednesday said they're not surprised Merced remains among the worst places in the country for air quality, although there is some good news to report.

On Wednesday the American Lung Association released its State of the Air report, which determined the air in the county can put residents' health at risk.

The 15th annual national report, which graded cities based on their scores for ozone and particle pollution levels, rated the Merced-Modesto area among the top 10 most polluted areas in the country.

Merced is among several counties in the San Joaquin Valley that received a failing grade, along with Fresno, Madera, Visalia and Bakersfield.

Merced ranked No. 7 in the list of cities with the most ozone pollution, dropping down from the 11th spot obtained in last year's report. However, Merced did see some improvement in year-round particle pollution. In this year's report, Merced ranked No. 5 in the list of worst particle pollution, whereas last year it ranked No. 1 alongside Bakersfield.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said the State of the Air report helps bring attention to the Valley's serious air quality issues; however, it does not tell the whole story.

"It's no surprise that the report puts San Joaquin Valley counties in the top 25 (most polluted) list as we face challenges unmatched by any other area in the nation," said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the air district. "What isn't being highlighted is the fact that the San Joaquin Valley has made huge improvements in air quality."

Because the report is based on pollution data collected by the Environmental Protection Agency from 2010 to 2012, it is not the most up-to-date data. Last year the Valley had its cleanest summer on record, but that isn't revealed in this year's report, Presto said.

According to the air district, the Valley's challenges in combating air pollution are unique in comparison to other areas because of its geography, topography and meteorology.

"It's not that we create more air pollution than other metropolitan areas, like Los Angeles or the Bay Area," Presto said. "We actually create a great deal less. However, our valley has a very low tolerance for pollution, reaching unhealthy levels very quickly, and no coastal winds to help clean it out."

The Fresno-Madera area ranked No. 1 in having the worst exposure to particle pollution in the country. The Los Angeles area has the worst ozone pollution, according to the data.

This year's cleanest cities are Bangor, Maine; Bismarck, N.D; Cape Coral-Fort Myers, Fla.; and Salinas.

American Lung Association leaders said the report indicated an overall improvement in air quality throughout the country.

"We are happy to report continued reduction of year-round particle pollution across the nation, thanks to cleaner diesel fleets and cleaner power plants," said Harold Wimmer, national president and CEO of the American Lung Association. "However, this improvement represents only a partial victory."

"We know that warmer temperatures increase risk for ozone pollution, so climate change sets the stage for tougher challenges to protect human health," he said.

Since its formation in 1992, the air district has reduced 108,000 tons of emissions through incentive programs that encourage the use of new technology to improve air quality, Presto explained.

"We have a long way to go to reach our clean-air goals in the San Joaquin Valley," he said, "but a great deal of progress has also been made."

Despite the efforts, poor air quality continues to be a significant public health concern.

People who face a higher risk of health issues related to pollution include children, older adults, those with heart disease, diabetes or asthma and anyone who works and exercises outdoors.

According to the American Lung Association, dangerous levels of ozone or particle pollution can cause coughing, asthma attacks, heart attacks and premature death.

Welcome to the Central Valley – home of just about the worst air in the nation

Central Valley Business Times, April 30, 2014

Most of the Central Valley is shrouded in some of the nation's worst air pollution, says the American Lung Association in an annual report released Wednesday.

The Fresno-Madera metropolitan area is the most polluted for particle pollution. But it has plenty of company from its neighbors on the association's "ten worst" lists:

Top 10 U.S. Cities Most Polluted by *Short-term* Particle Pollution (24-hour PM 2.5)

Metropolitan Statistical Areas

1. Fresno-Madera
2. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford
3. Bakersfield
4. Los Angeles-Long Beach
5. Modesto-Merced
6. Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton, Pa.-Ohio-W.Va.
7. Fairbanks, Alaska
8. Salt Lake City-Provo-Orem, Utah
9. El Paso-Las Cruces, Texas-N.M.

10. San Jose-San Francisco-Oakland

Top 10 U.S. Cities Most Polluted by Year-Round Particle Pollution (Annual PM 2.5)

Metropolitan Statistical Areas

1. Fresno-Madera
2. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford
3. Bakersfield (tied with)
3. Los Angeles-Long Beach
5. Modesto-Merced
6. Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton, Pa.-Ohio-W.Va.
7. El Centro
8. El Paso-Las Cruces, Texas-N.M. (tied with)
8. Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, Ariz. (tied with)
8. St. Louis-St. Charles-Farmington, Mo.-Ill,

Note: Cities with the same number ranking are tied (e.g., Bakersfield and Los Angeles are tied for 3rd most polluted.)

Top 10 Most Ozone-Polluted Cities

Metropolitan Statistical Areas

1. Los Angeles-Long Beach
2. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford
3. Bakersfield
4. Fresno-Madera
5. Sacramento-Roseville
6. Houston-The Woodlands, Texas
7. Modesto-Merced
8. Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas (tied with)
8. Washington, D.C.-Baltimore, Md.-Arlington, Va.
10. Las Vegas-Henderson, Nev.

But don't be too quick to read too much into the report, says the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which has authority from San Joaquin County south to Kern County.

The lung association's report "oversimplifies what is actually very complex," says spokesman Anthony Presto.

"It's no surprise that the report puts San Joaquin Valley counties in the top 25 list as we face challenges unmatched by any other area in the nation. What isn't being highlighted is the fact that the San Joaquin Valley has made huge improvements in air quality," he writes in an email to CVBT.

"The report's data is not the most up-to-date and as it is based on data from 2010-2012, while 2013 was the Valley's cleanest summer on record, with no violations of the 1-hour ozone standard. Compare that to 1996, when there were 281 violations.

"The Valley's challenges are unique in comparison to other areas because of our geography, topography and meteorology. It's not that we create more air pollution than other metropolitan areas, like Los Angeles or the Bay Area. We actually create a great deal less. However, our Valley has a very low

tolerance for pollution, reaching unhealthy levels very quickly, and no coastal winds to help clean it out," Mr. Presto says.

Nearly half of all Americans – more than 147 million – live in counties in the U.S. where ozone or particle pollutions levels make the air unhealthy to breathe, according to the report.

The 15th annual national report shows that while the nation overall continued to reduce particle pollution, a pollutant recently found to cause lung cancer, poor air quality remains a significant public health concern and a changing climate threatens to make it harder to protect human health.

"Especially alarming is that levels of ozone (smog), a powerful respiratory irritant and the most widespread air pollutant, were much worse than in the previous year's report," the association says.

"We are happy to report continued reduction of year-round particle pollution across the nation, thanks to cleaner diesel fleets and cleaner power plants," says Harold Wimmer, national president and CEO of the American Lung Association. "However, this improvement represents only a partial victory. We know that warmer temperatures increase risk for ozone pollution, so climate change sets the stage for tougher challenges to protect human health."

Once again, Los Angeles remains the metropolitan area with the worst ozone pollution, a ranking it has held in all but one of the 15 State of the Air reports. Fresno-Madera moved to the top of both lists for most polluted for particle pollution.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Bangor, ME, Bismarck, ND, Cape Coral-Fort Myers, FL, and Salinas, on California's Central Coast, were named the "cleanest cities" for having no days with unhealthy levels of ozone or particle pollution and for being among the 25 cities with the lowest year-round particle levels.

Central Valley cities on the list

By the Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Modesto Bee and other papers, Wednesday, April 30, 2014

FRESNO (AP) -- Cities in California's Central Valley dominate the American Lung Association's annual rankings of the nation's worst air pollution that were released Wednesday, though traditional dirty-air leader Los Angeles still tops key categories.

Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield rank Nos. 1,2 and 3 in the country for short-term spikes in fine-particle pollution in the Lung Association's 15th annual "State of the Air" report, meaning their residents inhale soot and other tiny pollution specks at unmatched levels.

It is the first time the Fresno-Madera area earned the distinction that Bakersfield had last year.

Los Angeles was fourth behind the three Central Valley cities in that category, but it's still on top in another, violating federal standards for ozone in the air 122 days a year.

The failing grades come despite decades of increasing air clarity in the areas that has still left them lagging behind the rest of the U.S.

"We've come a long way, but the status quo is not acceptable," Bonnie Holmes-Gen, a senior director of policy in Sacramento for the American Lung Association, told the Los Angeles Times.

Like the Los Angeles Basin, cities in Central California have stagnant weather and a bowl shape make cutting smog especially challenging.

"The San Joaquin Valley continues to be a very difficult challenge," Holmes-Gen told the Fresno Bee. "We have to recognize the problem."

It comes at a time when the state is going through a historically severe drought and on a day when wind-driven wildfires were plaguing Southern California.

Such dust and smoke could do damage to recent improvements and make the state's air even worse.

"There's a potential to erode some of the gains we've made in California," Jack Broadbent, leader of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, told the Bee.

The analysis doesn't include 2013, whose drought will likely bring a spike and still more dreary numbers next year.