

New campaign to ‘unmask’ Fresno, cut air pollution. ‘We are the canary in the coal mine’

By Carmen George

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The push for better air quality in the San Joaquin Valley has a new team of advocates – doctors – who are taking a more active role in demanding clean air for the region.

The Central California Asthma Collaborative has partnered with Unmask My City, a global air pollution initiative, with health professionals at the forefront of calling for change.

Fresno is the first city in California to join the initiative, said Jeni Miller, executive director of The Global Climate and Health Alliance, during a news conference Wednesday outside a Boys & Girls Club in southeast Fresno.

The new Unmask Fresno partnership comes at a key time for air quality advocacy in Fresno. The city was selected to receive more funds through the passage of Assembly Bill 617 in 2017, aiming to help communities most impacted by air pollution.

South Central Fresno and Shafter in Kern County are the first Valley communities that will receive additional resources through a California Air Resources Board project. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District expects to receive dozens of new pieces of mobile air monitoring equipment in the coming months.

“With much of the current discussion in the committee focusing on boundaries for the project,” Unmask Fresno leaders said, “we believe it is important to highlight the need to be inclusive in these air monitoring efforts.”

At stake in the fight for clean air is the health of hundreds of thousands of people living in the Valley – a region researchers say has some of the worst air in the country.

The Valley was classified as being in a “serious non-attainment” area for four federal standards.

Almost one in six children in the Valley have asthma or some type of respiratory problem – compared to a national average of one in 12 – “and that is directly due to bad air,” said Dr. Praveen Buddiga, a board member for the Central California Asthma Collaborative who runs the Family Allergy Asthma Clinic in Fresno.

The dangers of bad air go far beyond respiratory issues.

“Here in the San Joaquin Valley we are the most polluted air basin in the nation for fine particle pollution, PM 2.5,” said Genevieve Gale, executive director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, “and PM 2.5 is very fine particles in the air, and when we breathe them in, they can exasperate respiratory conditions and trigger asthma attacks, but they are also so fine they can enter our blood stream and travel to our heart and brain. And so increased levels of PM 2.5 are correlated with increased risk of heart attack, stroke and premature death.”

Unmask Fresno is calling for better air quality monitoring where air is directly polluted by industrial and transportation sources, along with policies and plans that shift away from diesel and reduce emissions.

“Any small step that we take in the right direction is going to help us,” Buddiga said.

Unmask Fresno said people in the Valley are exposed to unhealthy air on at least 200 days a year.

Among those in attendance at Wednesday’s news conference was Janet DietzKamei, a retired government employee and member of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, who described herself as a “canary in the coal mine.”

Asthma from bad air has kept her from doing many things she loves, including walking her dogs, cycling, and gardening.

“We are the ones who register when the air is bad,” DietzKamei said of people with respiratory diseases, “but everyone is affected by the air – everyone.”

DietzKamei attended the event wearing a mask over her nose and mouth connected to a mobile air monitor that lights up the mask with different colors – green, yellow, orange and red – to show the level of air pollution.

Unmask Fresno wants to place more than 60 PurpleAir PM 2.5 monitors across the region to help.

Jaime Holt, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said PurpleAir monitors aren't as exact as the district's federally recognized monitors and stations, which typically cost between \$20,000 and \$50,000 compared to \$200.

Still, Holt said, "We do believe this citizen science is an important tool for the Valley, as long as the public understands the limitations of these monitors."

Holt said the largest source of air pollution in the Valley is "mobile sources – anything with wheels," accounting for about 60 percent of air pollution. Other pollutants include farming operations – the running of heavy agricultural machinery, accounting for about 22 percent of PM 2.5 pollution, Holt said, fireplace burning, about 6 percent of pollution; and prescribed burning in forests and open ag burning, about 5 percent of pollution.

Unmask Fresno was critical of the air district about open ag burning, saying the Valley has seen that increase by 400 percent over the past five years. Holt responded by saying a 2003 California clean air law allows for this burning if there is not an "economically viable alternative" and cited a decline in biomass facilities, which turn materials into power. She added that ag burning is restricted to good air days and that she's seen "great interest" in exploring other alternatives, such as chipping to create mulch.

Unmask Fresno said the Valley exports "over \$50 billion in agricultural products at home and globally."

A video to promote #UnmaskFresno says that "Fresno, with a population of 500,000, is the gateway to the world-renowned Yosemite National Park. Yet people living in the area breathe some of the most polluted air in North America."