

American Lung Association: Despite improvements, Kern still ranks last in air quality

By Quinn Wilson

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Following the American Lung Association's State of the Air annual report for 2020, air quality experts pointed to both progress made and hurdles that remain toward achieving improved air quality locally.

The report, which saw Kern County finish bottom-three in the United States in three key air pollution categories, took data recorded by officials at the local, tribal, state and federal levels from 2016 to 2018.

During the report's 21-year history, Kern and the Central Valley as a whole have seen improvements in air quality according to Will Barrett, the lung association's clean air advocacy director in Sacramento. He said in this year's report, Kern County saw 103 days of "unhealthy air pollution," which is 83 less than what was recorded in the lung association's first report in 2000.

"That is significant improvement," Barrett said. "There's still a long way to go to protect everyone's health."

Barrett said one of the primary elements in this year's report was the impact climate change had on the data. All three years recorded ranked among the hottest in the study's history, which in turn increased the number of high ozone days and wildfires.

"(The report also featured) three of the five hottest years on record and five of the 10 most catastrophic wildfires in state history," Barrett said. "Those factors added to the ongoing challenges to cleaning the air in the San Joaquin Valley."

Ozone pollution is smog that comes from emissions of tailpipes and industrial sectors and is considered one of the most dangerous and widespread pollutants, according to the American Lung Association. Particle pollution measures dust, smoke and other results of combustion that are microscopic and can travel from an individual's lungs to their bloodstream.

Kern County moved from second-worst to worst in the year-round particle pollution category, ahead of the Fresno-Madera-Hanford area and Visalia.

In the short-term particle pollution matter category, Kern finished second-to-last behind the Fresno-Madera-Hanford metropolitan area. The category analyzes the 24-hour averaged PM2.5 concentration levels for the three-year period.

Kern County was considered the third-most ozone-polluted city in the nation behind Visalia and Los-Angeles-Long Beach, respectively.

During this past Check Before You Burn season, there were just 15 days in the Central Valley in which the air was over the federal 24-hour standard for the daily average particulate matter, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. That was lower than 2018-2019, when there were 35 days over the federal standard, and 2017-2018, when 55 days were over the standard.

Jaime Holt, chief communications officer at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said there are some indications that harmful oxide of nitrogen emissions have dropped since Gov. Gavin Newsom's stay-at-home order issued in March.

She said to sustain improved air quality throughout the valley, there needs to be federal and state funding mandating the replacement of equipment on the vehicles such as cars, commercial trucks and trains.

"There's a lot of technology that has been recently developed — or is still being developed — that will reduce the amount of pollution coming out of tailpipes," Holt said. "This technology is very expensive though."

Barrett said there's no doubt the Central Valley has seen a reduction in air pollution.

"The lesson to be learned is, we can see what is possible with fewer tailpipes on the road," he said. "If we don't take actions to continue to take lessons from what we see right now, air pollution will rear its ugly head again."