

Air district credits 10-year drop in particulates to regulations, incentives

By John Cox

Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021

Signs of cleaner air have been hard to spot lately through the haze of the southern Central Valley. But they're there.

A new analysis suggests that during the last decade Kern has made some of the biggest strides by any U.S. county in reducing fine particulate emissions, even as the region's air remains unhealthy and out of compliance with federal standards.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District credited the gains to its focus on regulations, incentives and community collaboration. It pointed to progress in cutting ozone, as well.

But as if to caution against hopes rising too high, the district noted by email that the trend of worsening wildfires poses stiff challenges to keeping up its recent pace of cutting fine particulates.

"While the valley has made significant gains in reducing PM2.5 (fine) air pollution, in recent years, increasingly devastating wildfires have caused extended periods of elevated PM2.5 concentrations with significant impacts to public health," the district wrote.

Frequently the air district has faced criticism from local air-quality advocates who say the agency isn't doing enough to rein in sources of emissions. Twice this year high-profile court rulings went against the district in legal developments that the plaintiffs called victories for clean air.

BIG CUT

But judging by federal air-quality measurements in 2011, as compared with 2021, Kern County has experienced one of the country's biggest reductions in fine particulates — not on a percentage basis but in raw numbers.

Ninety percent of the U.S. counties compared in the study saw lower levels of airborne specks measuring 2.5 microns in width or smaller. Kern was among them with 16.9 micrograms per cubic meter in 2021 versus 22.6 micrograms in 2011.

Kern's proportional improvement wasn't striking, with a drop of only 25 percent. Other counties did much better, led by 68 percent in Montana's Gallatin County.

Still, Kern was among only three counties that made the list of 68 top-performers despite being out of compliance with federal air quality standards. The analysis was done by the nonprofit Solutions Journalism Network, based on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data gathered by the American Lung Association.

The reason Kern made the list was its achievement in absolute numbers: Only eight other counties cut out more micrograms per cubic meter — 5.7 micrograms per cubic meter, in Kern's case — during the same period.

A representative of several local environmental quality groups said they were unable on a day's notice to comment on SJN's analysis.

PROGRESS

The air district said by email it has made substantial progress since 1997 in reducing particulates, and that it hopes the EPA will soon declare its adherence last year, finally, with standards in place 24 years ago.

The agency explained the region's unique weather and topography trap emissions such that fine particulates and ozone accumulate locally more than they do elsewhere.

The district's 2018 plan for reducing fine particulates relies on new regulations and incentive measures.

Industrial sources like boilers and flares will have to emit less pollution, and so will ag practices using internal combustion. Rules have gotten tougher as well on residential fireplaces and commercial charbroilers.

The district has meanwhile promoted cash incentives for private investment in cleaner-burning engines, residential gas inserts and other equipment.

It also placed more monitors in heavily impacted communities and cooperated with local schools and public health officers to keep people informed of current air-quality conditions.

New regulations are pending that would involve glass manufacturers and solid fuel boilers. The agency said it is tightening enforcement and hopes to work with the federal government on sources outside the district's jurisdiction, like heavy-duty interstate travel and locomotives.

Of particular concern for the agency are wildfires that raise fine-particulate levels to dangerous levels. The air district said it continues to advocate for stronger forest management policies such as prescribed burns.