

2002 Spike in Air Pollution Reverses Downward Trend

Officials downplay the one-year rise, partly blaming fires and heat. Others question current policy. Problem migrates to inland areas.

Gary Polakovic, Los Angeles Times, October 13, 2002

California has endured its worst air pollution season in several years, as inland valleys have been smothered in a pall of haze and ozone has spread to far-flung regions unaccustomed to smog.

The increase in pollution is a sharp reversal after years of improvements in air quality statewide and has renewed debate over whether California is on the right track in the fight for clean air.

Smog levels were up from Santa Clarita to Sacramento, driven by hot, dry, stagnant weather that prevailed statewide much of the summer and by forest fires that polluted the air over formerly smog-free places such as Death Valley National Park and the eastern Sierra Nevada.

In sharp contrast, coast-hugging urban communities from San Francisco to San Diego largely escaped the siege. Ozone pollution is rapidly becoming a thing of the past along the coastal plains as an east-west divide splits the state into zones of clean and polluted air.

Much of the city of Los Angeles and the southern part of Los Angeles County have been in that smog-free zone for several years. Smog-monitoring stations in downtown Los Angeles, Lynwood and West Los Angeles all recorded zero days so far this year in which ozone readings exceeded federal standards. Burbank has had one bad-air day. Reseda has had nine, according to data collected by the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

But the AQMD's jurisdiction -- all of Orange County and parts of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties -- overall experienced 49 days when ozone in at least one part of the basin exceeded federal health-based standards, 36% more than last year. Air quality officials treat the entire area as a single entity because emissions generated in one place help cause smog downwind.

Readings that exceed the federal standards mean there was enough ozone in the air to cause headaches, nausea or shortness of breath for at least some people an average of one day in three during smog season so far.

Air is considered unhealthy if it contains more than 120 parts per billion of ozone in one hour. The smog season officially ends Oct. 31, but air quality officials do not expect the figures to change greatly in the final weeks of the month.

The worst air pollution in Southern California has been in the Santa Clarita Valley, which has suffered 32 days of unhealthy ozone. Other Southland smog hotspots this year have included Crestline and Redlands (23 each); Banning (14); Rubidoux and Glendora (12 each).

Joe Cassmassi, senior meteorologist for the AQMD, said southerly ocean breezes carried emissions north to Santa Clarita. Also, wildfires in early summer kicked up massive amounts of nitrate -- not from smoke, but from air pollution fallout that had accumulated on chaparral for years -- adding to local smog. The AQMD also moved an air pollution tracking station in Santa Clarita, which may account for some of the extra violations, he said.

"Smog has been very noticeable this year. It makes our life more difficult," said Rick Winsman, president of the Santa Clarita Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Air quality officials caution against making too much of one year's smog levels. They emphasize how much smog depends on fickle weather conditions, and they instead rely on long-term trends to gauge progress. Measured by that yardstick, the progress toward clean air is indisputable.

A decade ago, weather conditions similar to those that occurred this summer would have produced nearly 150 unhealthy days, as well as a few dozen days of "very unhealthy" skies, when "air was so poor a healthy person would feel the effects just walking out the door," said an AQMD spokesman, Sam Atwood.

Days of bad ozone are down about 65% since 1992, the peak concentrations are much less severe, ozone is not massed over the urban core as it once was, and dreaded "first stage alerts," when air quality was very unhealthful for everybody, disappeared four years ago.

"Eighty percent of [California's] population lives within 10 miles of the coast. You have a great deal of the population in the South Coast area experiencing much cleaner air," said Jack Broadbent, administrator of air programs for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's West Coast office.

Thanks to stringent regulations and innovative solutions by industry, Californians now drive the cleanest cars powered by the cleanest fuels in use anywhere in the world. They use some of the cleanest consumer products and work in jobs using some of the cleanest technology in the nation. More reductions are on the way too, as new regulations require super-clean cars and smoke-free buses and trucks.

"I don't think we're losing our way. We are on target, but you're going to see year-to-year fluctuations," said AQMD's chief, Barry Wallerstein.

Others say that, after years of impressive gains, California may be slipping.

"I think California is backsliding on air quality," said V. John White, a Sierra Club lobbyist and air quality consultant in Sacramento. "We're always at risk of growth eating up our gains. Today, we're living off the extraordinary gains in the '80s and '90s, and we don't have much intensity and focus. There's a complacency -- too many victory laps. But the self-congratulatory phase is over, and we need to get back to work."

"We are concerned about it," said Rich Varenchik, spokesman for the state Air Resources Board. In the Los Angeles region, "progress ... has been pretty flat the past few years."

"Weather is obviously the main factor that has contributed to this little bump up," Varenchik said. But, he added, the Los Angeles area "still has this classic problem of more people, more growth, more miles driven. Maybe this year was just a hiccup, but it will take a couple more years to really see."

One peculiar trend scientists note is how smog is occurring farther and farther inland in California each year. The worst smog in the Sacramento area occurred far downwind in Placer County, while in the Los Angeles region, the ozone hotspot has steadily shifted eastward from Pasadena to Glendora and on to Crestline over the last 20 years.

Janet Arey, an atmospheric chemist at UC Riverside's Air Pollution Research Center, said rapid growth in inland regions means more home-grown emissions from businesses, consumer products and traffic. Also, reformulated paints, gasoline and solvents have less reactive chemicals, which slows ozone formation and causes it to reach peak levels farther downwind, she said.

Elsewhere in the state, the pattern of bad air in inland regions has persisted. **In the San Joaquin Valley, 33 days of unhealthful ozone were reported -- up 38% from the previous year. Parlier, a small town southeast of Fresno, had the most smoggy days and one of the highest readings in the state, almost 40% over the federal limit.**

In the Sacramento area, air violated the federal ozone standard on 10 days -- more than three times as many violations as last year, officials report.

"High heat, calm winds, temperatures over 100 degrees for days on end: That is the perfect recipe for smog stew, and that's what we had this year," said Kerry Shearer, spokesman for the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District.

Across the nation, more air pollution was measured in major cities over the last two years, as a result, largely, of record heat. Preliminary data show that there were 23% more days of high ozone in 2002 than in 2001, according to a report the U.S. Public Interest Research Group released in August.

The only winner in the California smog siege is Houston, which at one point supplanted the Los Angeles region for the nation's smog crown, but this year is on pace for a record-setting clean-air year, with 23 unhealthful days.

"The weather patterns that bring wind and rain to Houston bring stagnant weather to L.A. They flip-flop with each other a lot of the time," said Brian Lambeth, senior meteorologist for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Pollution ruling challenge dismissed

By Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, October 12, 2002

The California Farm Bureau Federation has suffered a setback in an ongoing legal battle over the state's agricultural air pollution exemption.

The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals has dismissed a legal challenge to a federal Environmental Protection Agency finding that says the state air pollution permitting system violates the federal Clean Air Act.

The court sided with an EPA request to dismiss the challenge.

Officials with the EPA could not be reached Friday, but an attorney for environmental groups that supported the EPA said the groups were happy with the appeals court's decision.

Brent Newell, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said, "Everyone's very encouraged by this development."

Newell's group represents Central Valley residents from the Merced County group Land Air and Water and from the Association of Irrigated Residents, which has members in Stanislaus, Kern and Kings counties.

Earthjustice also sided with the EPA in the farm federation's legal challenge.

Craig Moyer, a Los Angeles attorney for the farm federation, said Friday that the court's ruling doesn't amount to much and that another legal challenge will be filed.

"I don't think it means much to anyone, anywhere, except for lawyers," he said.

The entire issue stems from a legal settlement in May between three environmental groups, including Newell's, and the EPA.

In December 2001, the EPA approved letting California air districts issue federal Clean Air Act permits. At the same time, the EPA gave agriculture a three-year exemption so that agriculture sources of air pollution could be studied.

Soon after, Earthjustice, the Environmental Law and Justice Clinic and Newell's group sued the EPA, saying agriculture should not be exempt from clean air requirements.

Under the settlement, the EPA agreed to take over agriculture permitting.

Also in May, two federal sanction clocks were started for areas currently in non-compliance with Clean Air Act requirements.

If the agricultural exemption is not removed by the California legislature by November 2003, businesses could be forced to comply with more stringent offset requirements for pollution. And if the exemption still has not been removed by May 2004, there could be a freeze in federal highway dollars.

After the settlement in May, the Farm Bureau Federation filed a motion challenging the settlement.

The attorneys said Friday that they are not entirely sure why the court dismissed the challenge. They said it was a "jurisdictional" issue.

Both attorneys received written notice of the court's ruling Friday afternoon.

Moyer, representing the farm federation, said that the original challenge was filed prior to Oct. 3, the date of the EPA's official "finding" that the state's agricultural exemption did not conform to federal Clean Air Act standards.

The EPA had argued that the farm federation's challenge should be dismissed because the EPA hadn't yet made the finding, Moyer said.

He said the farm federation filed the challenge before the EPA made its "finding" in order to speed up the legal proceedings.

Moyer said the farm federation will now file another challenge.

Kerry Drake, an EPA associate air director, said earlier this month that the EPA's permitting is expected to apply to agricultural operations emitting 25 tons or more of ozone creating pollutants per year.

"We're talking about major sources," he said. "I would probably say larger farms" will be affected.

The cost of the federal permit is expected to be about \$36 per ton for the first 25 tons and \$36 per ton beyond that.

However, Drake also said that the cost may be lowered.

"We're still considering whether that's an appropriate fee," he said.

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee:](#)

Far too costly

By George Meyers

Fresno (Published Monday, October 14, 2002, 4:40 AM)

The Measure C committee is trying to meet the desires of several special interest groups and as a result taxpayers are being manipulated into approving taxes for projects that they normally would not voluntarily fund.

Most people in Fresno County have little problem being stopped by trains on Fresno's streets. I don't remember the last time I was stopped and I live in Fresno. If we move all the trains passing through Fresno from two sets of tracks to one, we will double the amount of train traffic on those tracks with increased congestion. Rail consolidation is not a Fresno County issue; it is a city of Fresno special interest group goal.

There are no public transportation systems that pay for themselves; they are all subsidized by general fund taxes. If the passengers had to pay the actual cost they would not use them. A larger public transportation system will require more general fund tax money to support. Do we need more near empty buses on Fresno's streets, more rural systems shutting down due to a lack of riders? Do we need a local Amtrak crisis?

'Wait and see'

By Jack Elwood

Fresno

(Published Monday, October 14, 2002, 4:40 AM)

Again John F. Ferdinandi Jr., president of Fresno Area Residents for Rail Consolidation, attempts to attach his agenda for rail consolidation with his [Oct. 6] letter, urging voters to solve rail congestion by voting for Measure C, thus eliminating 180 diesel locomotives that pass through

Fresno, creating pollution with their exhaust. How will rail consolidation accomplish this? There will still be 180 diesel locomotives passing through Fresno with rail consolidation. Maybe Mr. Ferdinandi should take a look at Freeway 99 with its hundreds of diesel trucks passing through Fresno every day and night, polluting as they go. How about a move to consolidate Freeway 99 with Interstate 5?

The Measure C extension will only benefit developers in providing more freeways and roads to create urban sprawl, and more polluting cars and trucks.

Measure C still has time before it expires. Let's wait and see what the situation looks like then.

Fresno should be looking at light rail, as many progressive cities -- Sacramento; San Jose; Portland, Ore. -- have done.

Vote "no" on the Measure C extension.

'Smart future'

By David R. Pepper

Fresno

(Published Saturday, October 12, 2002, 8:23 AM)

The Sept. 30 report on the appalling pollution in our national parks reveals yet another "cost" of urban sprawl and air pollution.

What does it say about our country that we have allowed the air in our national parks to become as filthy as that in our largest cities? If we care about ourselves, our lungs and our children we might take note of what is happening to our forests.

Sadly, years of funding for cars and freeways instead of our parks have created another crisis. National parks are, on average, operating with only two-thirds of the necessary funding. As a result, historic buildings are crumbling, wildlife is disappearing and cultural artifacts are threatened.

We may also want to think of the role our cars, trucks and SUVs play in polluting the air, and the true costs of urban sprawl and urbanization of our farms, countryside and national parks. Do we want to put more money into freeways and sprawl (e.g. Measure C) or truly invest in our future?

As for my vote, it's "no" on this Measure C extension. If we are going to spend money on transportation, let's put it into rails, buses, bikeways and smart transit that help clean the air and create a smart future for us and the trees. Let's send a message to Congress that we are doing our part to help the national parks and then ask them to help, too.

Our Transportation Future: Yes on C

By Gordon M. Webster Jr.

chairman of the Measure C Committee

(Published Sunday, October 13, 2002, 5:56 AM)

We are the heart of the fastest growing region in California, now the sixth largest economy in the world. As Fresno County's population approaches the 1 million mark, our infrastructure must change to meet tomorrow's needs.

That's why Measure C on our Nov. 5 ballot includes a balanced program of transit, street repair, safety improvements and local incentives for transportation alternatives.

Measure C means safer highways, roads and streets. It will provide much-needed funds to add more traffic signals, improve access for emergency vehicles and eliminate 43 dangerous railroad crossings. Fresno police, firefighters and health care professionals support Measure C because it will save lives.

You've enjoyed the benefits of Measure C since voters first approved it in 1986. Local funds have been matched dollar for dollar by state and federal money on regional projects like Highways 99, 41, 168 and 180. More than 1,157 miles of Measure C improvements have made streets safer, traffic less congested and our quality of life better.

But our environment has changed. The new Measure C is the product of strong community collaboration to meet the challenges before us.

A broad-based community steering committee labored over the plan for more than a year. Business, seniors, environmentalists, community advocates, and rural and urban cities participated. The committee examined programs in other counties, heard presentations by air quality experts and reviewed innovative land use techniques and transportation technology.

The Measure C plan that emerged was very different from what any one person originally envisioned. That's democracy -- a community coming together and compromising for the common good.

Some members of the committee negotiated their best deal, then turned away. They have that right. But no one has the right to misrepresent the facts.

These are the facts about Measure C:

It includes more funding for transit than similar programs in Riverside and Sacramento. Measure C guarantees \$364 million over the life of the measure -- a 25% increase in FAX funding in today's dollars. That means more buses, more routes, more night and weekend service.

Projects in the Measure C expenditure plan meet strict federal requirements for air quality. Measure C improves air quality by increasing transit, reducing congestion, separating railroad crossings from streets and roads, and reducing wait times and emissions.

Measure C repairs local streets and roads in neighborhoods throughout the county. More than \$245 million is committed to urgent repairs of potholes, surfaces, sidewalks and shoulders. Without Measure C, how will the city of Fresno ever have the money for curb cuts?

Measure C is not a new tax or a tax increase. Its 30-year term is comparable to today's school, water or parks bonds and ensures there's enough funding to complete urgent projects. A citizens oversight committee will review annual audits and ensure that funds are spent as promised to voters.

If we do nothing, air quality will only get worse. If we wait, Los Angeles and San Francisco will continue to take the lion's share of funds.

Here's how your Measure C dollar will meet transportation needs:

Transit: 13 cents. Measure C means more routes, more buses (including low emission), more night and weekend service, more bus shelters.

Transportation choices: 3.5 cents. Top priority is improving access for the disabled, including curb cuts and Handy Ride vans. Trails, bike paths and lanes will be improved. Measure C has innovative incentives for public transportation and neighborhood revitalization that make transit viable.

Maintenance: 8.75 cents. Measure C repairs and improves local streets and roads, fixing potholes, sidewalks and other hazards.

Local discretionary program: 22.75 cents. Local communities meet local needs through \$637 million for maintenance, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, signals, transit, landscaping or air quality infrastructure.

Rail consolidation: 5 cents. Measure C has essential start-up funding that will leverage state and federal funds for improved safety and mobility through rail consolidation. Without Measure C, rail consolidation will remain a distant hope.

Air service: 1 cent. More than \$28 million will be invested in improvements to Fresno Yosemite International Airport.

Regional program in the urban areas: 24 cents (\$667 million) and regional program in rural areas, 21 cents (\$583 million) for a variety of transportation purposes, with priority for projects that improve air quality.

Administration: 1 cent. By law 1% will go toward the cost of administration of Measure C funds for the next 30 years.

People who don't always agree have come together to pass Measure C: chambers of commerce, unions, firefighters, teachers, police, sheriffs and health care professionals.

We want to keep Measure C working for all of us, with safer roads, less traffic and no new taxes.

I hope that you will consider the facts and join me in voting "yes" on Measure C this Nov. 5. You can learn more at www.yesonmeasurec.com.

Our Transportation Future: No on C

By Mary Savala
co-president of the League of Woman Voters of Fresno
(Published Sunday, October 13, 2002, 5:56 AM)

One out of every six children living in Fresno County today has been diagnosed with asthma. That rate is twice the statewide average. People of all ages in the Fresno-Clovis metropolitan area die of asthma at rates surpassed only by those in New York and Chicago. This is a crisis. It is a costly epidemic of human suffering, disease and death. And asthma is just one of several afflictions caused or worsened by air pollution. People suffering from other types of lung disease, heart disease and allergies also feel smog's deadly effects. Their daily lives are impacted. Many die prematurely.

This is an unconscionable situation, a predicament that requires our community's full attention and a dedication of resources. All of our major decisions about transportation and land use must be made in this context.

Measure C is one such decision. In terms of air pollution, it is the most important decision of our time. It will make or break us.

Between the current 20-year Measure C and its proposed 30-year extension, we would be bound by a 50-year, \$3.5 billion transportation spending program. The spending priorities of this program will determine whether we climb out of this sea of smog or sink more deeply into it.

Shall we continue to sprawl out across the countryside, turning rural towns into commuter bedrooms and turning open space around our cities into massive subdivisions?

Measure C's proponents seek to perpetuate such growth through freeway expansions, expressways and wider streets. They envision high speed -- therefore high-polluting traffic -- racing back and forth across the landscape, more cars and trucks traveling more times per day over greater distances, and always going faster.

Our local transportation planners argue that such roads reduce traffic congestion, but they have failed to look over the hills into Southern California and the Bay Area to learn the folly of this approach. While urban centers struggle to fight their way out of congestion through modern mass transit and smart growth, we are being asked to build our way into congestion. Even state transportation planners, however, tell us we cannot build our way out of congestion.

Local transportation planners foresee a leapfrog jump into foothill and mountain communities connected to the Fresno-Clovis metro area through an expensive network of four-, six- or even eight-lane highways and expressways. They are laying the foundation for the Los Angeles-ization of Fresno County.

Measure C's proponents refuse to change course. They are instead proposing a binding commitment to highway building through 2017, and hiding from public consideration a much longer list of projects to be considered after the election. Those additions include a foothill freeway along the base of the Sierra Nevada, new bridges across the San Joaquin River, widening of streets throughout the Fresno-Clovis metro area and much more.

The "flexibility" sought by Measure C's proponents is not the flexibility to change course but the political flexibility to appease special interests and protect political turf.

There is no list of alternative projects such as a modern public transit system or an urban network of "calm" streets safe for pedestrians and cyclists. There is only a long list and long tradition of road projects.

Where do we go from here? First, we go to the polls to vote "no" on Measure C. This rejection will send a clear message to local politicians, business interests and bureaucrats who shaped this tax extension. They will hear that Fresno County residents care more for their children's health, the viability of our agricultural economy and the quality of life than land-use schemes.

We have time to do the real work necessary to devise a comprehensive transportation spending plan. This work must involve all segments of our community and a process that expresses our citizens' strong desire for clean air, neighborhood improvement, safe routes to schools, rural road maintenance and a convenient, reliable public transportation system. Transportation spending can then be balanced, and our community can become healthy again.

The current Measure C does not expire until 2007. We have time to get it right, but first we must vote "no" on Nov. 5. This Measure C is the wrong Measure C.

