

Southern California gets low grade for fighting smog

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LOS ANGELES (AP) - Southern California got a low grade for fighting smog in a new environmental study that warns air quality could worsen without better programs and technology.

The region made major progress in cutting pollution over the last several decades, but the improvement may slow in the future, according to a report card released Wednesday by the UCLA Institute of the Environment.

Ozone levels, for instance, dropped significantly before 1999 but saw no improvement over the next few years and climbed back to 1998 levels this summer.

Meanwhile, the study said, particulate matter such as diesel exhaust routinely exceeds clean air standards and has seen no improvement over the past five years.

The study gave Southern California a C- for its prospects of cleaning up the air over the next decade, down from the 1998 grade of C.

"As growth continues, the existing policies may not be able to balance increases in emissions, and air quality may deteriorate," said Suzanne Paulson, a professor of atmospheric sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles who authored the study's air quality section.

Relatively inexpensive and politically feasible solutions like reformulating gasoline may no longer make a significant impact on pollution, she said.

A more rigorous and possibly more expensive approach that includes phasing out and replacing heavy polluting diesel engines is needed, Paulson said.

"We need to accept as a society that when cleaning up the air, regulators can't pull these easy answers out of a hat and that it's going to be a little more expensive and a little bit harder," she said.

Air pollution is believed to contribute to as many as 9,000 premature deaths in the Southern California basin each year, the study said.

In a separate action Tuesday, a coalition of environmental activists called on state officials to adopt tougher pollution controls at a news conference in Los Angeles.

"We must make them see that dirty air is bad for our health, it's bad for our children, and it's really bad for business," actress and activist Julia Louis-Dreyfus said at the event, organized by the Natural Resources Defense Council, Coalition for Clean Air and other groups.

Southern California earned better grades in other areas of the report.

Los Angeles scored a B- for "smart growth" policies that aim to reduce car travel, increase open spaces and promote environmentally sensitive urban areas.

The city was praised for trying to reuse older buildings and increase mixed-use zoning. But the city left it up to developers to request zone changes rather than taking steps toward rezoning areas itself, the study said.

The report also docked Los Angeles for ignoring a need for developing moderate-income housing in its general plan.

In other grades, Southern California rated a D for controlling invasive plant species and a B- for present efforts at marine preservation.