California Residents Breathe USA's Most Polluted Air

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WASHINGTON, DC, April 24, 2017 (ENS) – Air pollution in California cities is the worst in the United States, both for short-term and year-round pollution, finds new research published by the American Lung Association in its **2017 "State of the Air" report**. Los Angeles, Bakersfield and Visalia topped all most-polluted lists in the report.

Each year the "State of the Air" reports on the two most widespread outdoor air pollutants, ozone pollution and particle pollution.



Long-range view of Los Angeles air pollution from behind the famous Hollywood sign, Feb. 2016 (Photo by Steve Boland)

This 18th annual national air quality report card found that 125 million Americans, 38.9 percent, lived in counties with unhealthful levels of either ozone or particle pollution in 2013-2015. This exposure places them at risk for premature death and other serious health problems such as lung cancer, asthma attacks, cardiovascular damage, and developmental and reproductive harm.

"This year's 'State of the Air' report is a testament to the success of the Clean Air Act, which has reduced air pollution in much of the nation," said Harold Wimmer, national president and chief executive of the American Lung Association. "As a result, Americans' lung health is far better protected today than it was before the Clean Air Act health protections began nearly five decades ago."

"However," Wimmer said, "this report adds to the evidence that the ongoing changes in our climate make it harder to protect human health. As we move into an ever warmer climate, cleaning up these pollutants will become ever more challenging, highlighting the critical importance of protecting the Clean Air Act."

Wimmer is feeling defensive about the Clean Air Act because President Donald Trump has issued a budget slashing by 31 percent funding for the agency responsible for administering the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Trump's first budget has yet to be approved by the U.S. Congress, but already the EPA has rescinded what EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt called "an unjustified, premature evaluation of greenhouse gas and fuel economy standards for model year 2022-2025 vehicles."

The Trump administration is reviewing the entire Clean Air Act, and that could have a big effect on air quality in California.



Triple level traffic jam on the Los Angeles freeways under hazy skies, Sept. 15, 2015 (Photo by **Jim Sheaffer**)

California has a unique power under the Clean Air Act. At any time, the state can ask the EPA administrator for a waiver to restrict tailpipe emissions more strictly than the federal government. If its proposed rules are "at least as protective of public health and welfare" as the EPA's, then the agency must grant the waiver.

No other state can ask for a waiver, but under the same section of the Clean Air Act, any other state can choose to adopt California's stricter standards, and 15 state currently do so.

Not all the news in the American Lung Association's report is bad. The analysis finds continued improvement in air quality over the 2013-2015 time period, but also finds that "a continued increase in dangerous spikes in particle pollution is putting Americans' health at risk."

Unhealthy particles in the air are emitted from diesel engines, wildfires, wood-burning devices and coal-fired power plants.

Known as PM2.5, these microscopic particles lodge deep in the lungs and trigger asthma attacks, heart attacks and strokes, cause lung cancer and shorten life.

The report grades both daily spikes, called short-term particle pollution, and annual average or year-round level that represents the concentration of particles day-in and day-out by location.

The report analyzes particle pollution in two ways: through average annual particle pollution levels and short-term spikes in particle pollution. Both ozone and particle pollution are dangerous to public health and can be lethal.

But the trends reported in this year's report, which covers data collected by states, cities, counties, tribes and federal agencies in 2013-2015, are different for these pollutants.

The largest improvements in air quality tracked in this report result from the ongoing reduction in high ozone days and in levels of year-round particle pollution.

Steps to clean up emissions that produce these widespread pollutants have allowed many cities to reach the lowest concentrations of these pollutants since the "State of the Air" report first reported them.

By contrast, and despite these improvements, many cities hit their highest average number of days when particle levels spiked.

Many cities experienced their highest number of spikes since the monitoring for particle pollution began in 2000-2002, with 43 million people living in counties that experienced too many days when particle pollution peaked at unhealthy levels.

Increased heat, changes in climate patterns, drought and wildfires – all related to climate change – contributed to the extraordinarily high number of days with unhealthy particulate matter, the report shows.



Bakersfield, California is an oil-producing city. This rig is located near the downtown area. (Photo by Jennifer)

"Even with the ongoing improvements, too many people in the United States live where the air is unhealthy for them to breathe. This is simply unacceptable," Wimmer said. "Everyone has a fundamental right to breathe healthy air. Our nation's leaders must do more to protect the health of all Americans."

Short-term spikes in particle pollution increased in eight of the 10 most polluted cities in 2013-2015, including in the city ranked once again as having the worst short-term particle pollution problem, Bakersfield, California.

Situated at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, Bakersfield is the capital of Kern County, the most productive oil producing county, and the fourth most productive agricultural county, by value, in the United States.

Industries include natural gas and other energy extraction, aerospace, mining, petroleum refining, manufacturing, distribution and food processing.

Top 10 U.S. Cities Most Polluted by Short-Term Particle Pollution (24-hour PM2.5):

1. Bakersfield, California
2. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford, California
3. Fresno-Madera, California
4. Modesto-Merced, California
5. Fairbanks, Alaska
6. San Jose-San Francisco-Oakland, California
7. Salt Lake City-Provo-Orem, Utah
8. Logan, Utah-Idaho
9. Los Angeles-Long Beach, California
10. Reno-Carson City-Fernley, Nevada

By contrast, year-round particle pollution levels have dropped across much of the nation, including in half of the 10 cities most polluted by year-round particle pollution.

While fewer people suffered from unhealthy year-round levels of particle pollution, 19.9 million people were still living with unhealthy levels in 2013-2015.

Several cities, including four among the 10 most polluted, reached their lowest levels ever.

This continued progress is due to the cleanup of coal-fired power plants and the retirement of old, dirty diesel engines, steps taken because of the Clean Air Act.

Visalia-Porterville-Hanford, California was an area where levels worsened, and it ranked as the city with the worst year-round level in 2013-2015.

Top 10 U.S. Cities Most Polluted by Year-Round Particle Pollution (Annual PM2.5):

1. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford, California
2. Bakersfield, California
3. Fresno-Madera, California
4. San Jose-San Francisco-Oakland, California
5. Los Angeles-Long Beach, California
6. Modesto-Merced, California
7. El Centro, California
8. Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton, Pennsylvania-Ohio-West Virginia
9. Cleveland-Akron-Canton, Ohio
10. San Luis Obispo-Paso Robles-Arroyo Grande, California

The 2017 report found that far fewer people suffered from unhealthy ozone pollution than in the 2016 report, although 116.5 million people lived in counties that earned an F for too much pollution.

Los Angeles remains the most polluted city for ozone, yet it's one of the six of the 10 most ozone-polluted cities list that have reached their best levels yet.

This progress is due to steps taken under the Clean Air Act to clean up the emissions nationwide that create ozone, including emissions from cars and trucks as well as power plants.

Inhaling ozone pollution acts like a sunburn of the lung, and can trigger coughing and asthma attacks, and may even shorten life.

Top 10 Most Ozone-Polluted Cities:

1. Los Angeles-Long Beach, California
2. Bakersfield, California
3. Fresno-Madera, California
4. Visalia-Porterville-Hanford, California
5. Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, Arizona
6. Modesto-Merced, California
7. San Diego-Carlsbad, California
8. Sacramento-Roseville, California
9. New York-Newark, New York–New Jersey-Connecticut-Pennsylvania
10. Las Vegas-Henderson, Nevada-Arizona

The report also identified the cities with the least air pollution in 2013-2015, and found that only six cities had no days when ozone or particle pollution reached unhealthy levels and also had the lowest year-round levels of particle pollution.

Top Cleanest U.S. Cities, in alphabetical order

- Burlington-South Burlington, Vermont
- Cape Coral-Fort Myers-Naples, Florida
- Elmira-Corning, New York
- Honolulu, Hawaii
- Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville, Florida
- Wilmington, North Carolina

"The Clean Air Act is the most important tool in the fight for healthy air; it has successfully saved lives and improved health by driving emission reductions for more than 47 years, as 'State of the Air' continues to document," Wimmer said.

"We urge President Trump, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and members of Congress to fully fund, implement and enforce the Clean Air Act for all pollutants," he said, "including those that drive climate change and make it harder to achieve healthy air for all."

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