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Dirty air inhales billions

Study finds Valley pollution takes economic toll

STOCKTON - The San Joaquin Valley's notoriously dirty air costs the average San Joaquin County resident \$789 each year, according to a new study.

The Valley's failure to meet federal air regulations costs an estimated \$3 billion every year in lost productivity, health-care costs, premature deaths and other factors, said Jane Hall, a California State University, Fullerton, economics professor who led the study.

The actual amount could range from \$1 billion to \$8.4 billion, "but it's a substantial figure in any event," Hall said.

It's no secret that the San Joaquin Valley has some of the dirtiest air in the country. But some observers view the study as the first to put a dollar figure on the problem.

"I never thought about it in terms of dollars and cents," said Paul Betancourt, president of Valley Clean Air Now, a nonprofit, business-based, clean air advocacy group. "It's just another reason why we need to keep working on this."

The Valley has never met federal standards for fine particulate pollution. But if it did, 460 fewer residents older than 30 would die premature deaths each year, according to the study.

There would also be 260 fewer hospital admissions, 3,000 fewer lost days at work, 23,300 fewer asthma attacks, and children would miss 188,000 fewer days of school.

Study authors pegged pollutants known as fine particulates as the biggest problem. Measuring a fraction of the width of a human hair and less, such pollutants can become trapped in human lungs, causing serious illness or even death.

Heavy vehicle traffic, dust and organic gases produced by farms and the Valley's bowl-like structure all contribute to the problem.

Air pollution is even worse in the southern part of the Valley, where the bad air costs the average Kern County resident \$1,209 per year.

The study's authors noted the Valley air is improving. Over the past several years, ever-stricter rules have been placed on developers, business owners and farmers in an effort to reduce pollution.

Construction companies must reduce flyaway dust by spraying water on building sites. Farmers have been told to come up with ways to minimize dust from harvesting crops, and developers are required to pay fees for projects that contribute to vehicle smog.

Katherine Phillips of the advocacy group Environmental Defense said the study proves the cost of air pollution is greater than the cost of cleaning it up.

Phillips cited as an example recent rules for developers that would tack \$1,800 onto the price of a single-family home. According to the study, cleaning the air could save the family inside the home about \$4,000 a year, she said.

"It's been hard for the air districts to provide a persuasive argument for some of their regulations because they haven't been able to effectively express the health costs to the community," Phillips said. "This (study) is a tremendous contribution."

California State University, Fullerton, and the Central Valley Health Policy Institute of California State University, Fresno, sponsored the study.

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