

A Valley's Smog Toll Tallied

In the San Joaquin, resulting health costs are \$3.2 billion a year, a Cal State Fullerton study finds. That much would be gained by cleaner air.

By Janet Wilson, Times Staff Writer
March 30, 2006

Smog in the San Joaquin Valley is responsible for \$3.2 billion annually in health costs, according to findings released Wednesday by a Cal State Fullerton team.

The lion's share of those costs — an estimated \$3 billion — is tied to 460 smog-related deaths each year. Other major factors are school and work absences, hospital admissions and treatment for bronchitis and other illnesses.

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The team concluded that the valley — with air quality that ranks among the worst in the nation, along with Los Angeles and Houston — would save more than \$3 billion if it came into compliance with federal and state ozone and particulate standards.

"The results are important because it gives people a concrete sense of what price people pay for dirty air, and the flip side of that is the economic benefits of moving more quickly to achieve ... air quality standards," said the study's lead author, Jane Hall, a professor of economics and co-director of the Institute for Economics and Environmental Studies at Cal State Fullerton.

Savings would come from 188,000 fewer school absences, an equal number of reduced-activity days for adults, 23,000 fewer asthma attacks, and reductions in hospital admissions, acute bronchitis and other health problems.

The study found that although the entire valley suffered from bad air throughout the year because of its unique topography and weather, poor communities in Kern and Fresno counties were hit hardest by pollution and its costs.

Major sources of the air pollution include agricultural equipment as well as truck and car traffic along the 99 and 5 freeways.

The research team did similar studies on the economic benefits of reducing air pollution in the Los Angeles Basin 18 years ago, and in Houston and San Francisco since then.

The bulk of the savings comes from preventing premature deaths from cancer, heart attack and other ailments from chronic exposure to particulates, according to study coauthor Victor Brajer, an economics professor at Cal State Fullerton.

Brajer said longtime workplace studies show that wages are higher where there is a greater risk of death. He also said other studies indicate that people spend more on consumer safety products where mortality risks are greater. Such costs are averaged together to arrive at an overall per-capita figure.

Similar estimates are now also used by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and others in research on costs and benefits of reducing air pollution.

Air regulators said the studies have been widely used to counteract claims by businesses that controlling air pollution costs too much and would lead to catastrophic economic losses.

"A large part of the economic consequences of air pollution come from Jane Hall, from the studies that she and her staff have done over the years," said California Air Resources Board spokesman Jerry Martin. He said air regulators in the Los Angeles Basin in particular were "under enormous pressure" in the late 1980s from manufacturers and other industries threatening to move away if they were required to implement costly air pollution control measures until Hall's study provided a counterbalance showing substantial economic benefits to reducing air pollution.

Additionally, he said the state air board in the mid-1990s faced "draconian" proposals by the federal government that could have cost billions more to implement, but that Hall's work showed the state plan was the most cost-effective.

Kelly Morphy, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the study could still be helpful to her agency's efforts to secure tougher regulations from state and federal air regulators of vehicle emissions in the valley.

"I think we've turned that corner in that the businesses and industry in the San Joaquin Valley understand that they play an important role in cleaning up the air," she said. "But where we are now because of the unique topography and weather issues in the valley is we need more controls than the local air district has the authority to adopt. The bulk of the emissions, especially when we talk about summertime pollution, is from mobile sources, from cars and trucks."

Sam Atwood, spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said Hall's study of the Los Angeles Basin "was really one of the first times we had a very scientific and methodical approach to quantifying the health benefits of cleaning up the air."

He said the district's 2003 air pollution control plan, now in effect, found average yearly benefits of complying with state and federal air standards to total an estimated \$6.4 billion, while total costs were \$3.25 billion.