

Lois Henry CALIFORNIAN COLUMNIST

# Hype clouds picture of pollution



I have no idea how to say this, so I'm just going to say it: Claims about air pollution's devastating effects on public health are, um, hoey. Or at least largely hoey.

You have no idea how it pains me to say that having many times, and publicly so, taken officials to task for not doing more to clean our "filthy air."

Please don't take this to mean we shouldn't continue to try to make our air as clean as possible.

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We should. But it should be done using a reasoned approach based on solid scientific evidence without the wild claims and near hysteria some environmental groups have beaten us over the

heads with to keep us in fear of our next breath without more and more and MORE regulation.

Here's what I've concluded after reading a number of studies, talking to scientists and physicians and looking at some common sense data:

**A)** Our air is cleaner than it's been in 30 years. And isn't nearly as bad as we've been led to believe.

**B)** The pollution we do have is

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# HENRY: Death rate not out of whack

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not killing us.

Recently we were told by Cal State Fullerton researchers that bad air costs the San Joaquin Valley \$6 billion a year, most of that due to the "premature" deaths of more than 800 people.

That figure isn't an actual cost, as if those 800 people were pumping billions of dollars into the economy when they were suddenly felled by a whiff of ozone. It's a statistical value the researchers placed on human life, and, in my mind, it's misleading at best.

Other than that, the media reported that more than 800 people actually kicked the bucket last year because of pollution. (Editors in this newsroom were skeptical and our story did quote a researcher who said the number was inflated, but we could have dug deeper.)

The real question on whether air pollution is killing people in droves ought to be, "Really?"

I'm convinced the answer is a resounding NOT REALLY.

**A 2003 study by James Enstrom, an epidemiologist at University of California, Los Angeles,** found California did not have a death rate out of whack with our population. We don't have a lot of premature deaths, much less from air pollution.

In fact, California has the fourth lowest total age-adjusted death rate in the U.S., according to Enstrom.

"The irony is, people are living longer in this state than ever before," he said.

A Johns-Hopkins study released last month backs up Enstrom's death rate findings specifically for exposure to PM2.5 (very small particulate matter, such as soot, which is what's keeping us from using our fireplaces, by the by).

"For the 32 western U.S. locations, there is little evidence of an association between chronic PM2.5 and mortality," the study states.

Enstrom is one of a handful of scientists and researchers fed up with groups using small, inconclusive studies to draw extreme conclusions that are then used to create stringent regulations.

"The claims have just gotten out of sight," Enstrom told me. "Unfortunately, this has become an agenda for a lot of organizations that used to be more interested in research on diseases and now want to be advocates for ways to deal with them and they aren't focused on real research anymore."

**I know the enviros out there are madly Googling Enstrom** for any hint of association with "evil industry." So to save you some time, he

did one study funded by the Electric Power Research Institute and beyond that has no ties to corporations that might benefit from him saying we've been bamboozled on air pollution.

I also spoke with Joel Schwartz, a Sacramento-based environmental consultant who used to work for the Reason Foundation but who started out working for an environmental group in Los Angeles and didn't like the kind of "science" he saw being perpetrated on the public.

Most of the studies being used by regulators are epidemiological or meta-analysis, Schwartz said.

The first looks at groups of people and ties them together by common factors, such as people who had heart attacks and whether they were exposed to high levels of PM2.5 in a certain time frame before the attack.

The second type of study, meta-analysis, aggregates the results of a bunch of other previous studies that looked at similar hypotheses. I'd never heard of such a thing and, frankly, it kinda sounds like cheating to me.

"Activists and regulators are in the business of finding dragons to slay," Schwartz said. "The air is so much cleaner now but they keep tightening the standards and finding ways to make false claims that lower and lower pollution levels are more and more harmful."

"They stay in business as long as the public has the perception that there's a problem to solve."

Take asthma, he said.

**We've been told for years that pollution and asthma go hand in hand.** If that's true, how can it also be true that asthma rates continue to climb — even on the Central Coast, which has virtually no air quality problems — while our pollution continues to drop?

I had no answer for that, other than, "DOH!"

Some months ago, I was hot after a story tip about elderly people who'd lived here all their lives and never smoked reportedly coming up with terrible lung diseases, of course, because of our air.

I spoke with Dr. Augustine Munoz, a pulmonary specialist at Kern Medical Center, and was deflated when he told me, essentially, nah, ain't happening. Air pollution, he said, doesn't hurt healthy lungs.

"The most rapidly growing lung problem we have in Kern County is sleep apnea due to obesity," he said.

His answers didn't fit my theory. I tucked the interview away and only revisited it when I started wondering about those 800 alleged air

pollution deaths. Go figure!

When I asked San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District Executive Director Seyed Sadredin about what I'd learned, he wasn't surprised.

He said the Federal Environmental Protection Agency sets the standards for how much of each pollutant can be in the air at a healthy concentration based on "what we have to assume is proper scientific study."

Even as we've reduced pollution in the valley by 80 percent from industrial sources and 60 percent overall since 1980 (despite a massive population increase) the feds have continued to ratchet down our pollution standards, claiming new science shows even smaller concentrations are unhealthy, particularly for sensitive groups such as the elderly, children and people with respiratory problems.

Even with all that, it's not enough for some environmental groups.

**Earth Justice recently sued because the feds found the valley in compliance** on the old standard for PM10 (airborne particles, like PM2.5, only bigger) as we hadn't exceeded that old standard in five years.

A new standard is being adopted, but Earth Justice sued over the old one.

Clearly, this is not about Earth Justice fighting for our health. If the valley is found in "attainment" it takes away the legal hammer to demand even greater regulation based on what appears to be dubious science, and collect legal fees, of course.

The real danger is that people won't put up with being lied to, at least not for long, and a serious backlash could undo the decades of good work that have given us cleaner air.

"If you don't objectively and honestly portray the problem, you do lose credibility," Sadredin said.

Ya think?

*Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at [people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred](http://people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred), call her at 395-7373 or e-mail [lhenry@bakersfield.com](mailto:lhenry@bakersfield.com).*