

'State of the Air' report ranks Lake County No. 3 nationwide for cleanest air

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
Saturday, 02 May 2009

LAKE COUNTY — Lake County's air has received recognition once again from the American Lung Association.

The association's 2009 State of the Air report, released this week, gave Lake County an "A" rating.

The report ranked Lake County as having the lowest small-particulate concentrations in California and third-lowest airborne small-particulate concentrations in the entire United States. Nationally, Lake County was right behind Gallatin, Mont., and Laramie, Wyo., which tied for best air. Last year the county was ranked No. 9.

It's the best ranking the county has received since the American Lung Association began doing the reports several years ago, according to , said county Air Pollution Control Officer Doug Gearhart.

Lake was the only California county to rank in the top 10 cleanest counties in the United States for particulate matter, and was one of only 12 counties that did not have any days of ozone air pollution levels in the unhealthy range, Gearhart said. Among the top 25, the only other California counties to be ranked were Mendocino, Inyo and Nevada.

The report looked at the years 2005, 2006 and 2007, said Gearhart. During those three years, zone and small particles in the air never exceeded allowable levels.

Information on 2008, which saw Lake County skies clouded by thick smoke from wildland fires, wasn't included, he added.

"We're in our 20th year of clean air attainment in Lake County," said Gearhart.

He credited the program's success to strong community support and cooperation of local agencies, the local fire protection districts, Cal Fire, the local agricultural community and industry.

That community support, Gearhart added, has enabled the county to comply in full with Federal Clean Air Standards and the more rigorous California standards for ozone and other air pollutants for the past 20 years.

The clean air rankings have become controversial in recent years, with some area residents saying that they don't believe the county's high air quality rankings are representative of the true state of the air.

Gearhart explained that the county has three separate particulate monitoring stations in the county — in Lakeport, the Glenbrook/Cobb area and Anderson Springs — but is only required to have one.

Over the years, the county has established a burn ban beginning on May 1 and running through the fall, which is credited as another way of keeping the local air clean.

Gearhart said illegal burning still happens, but it's becoming less frequent, with only about 2 percent of the local population being found illegally burning. He said educating people about burning rules, and making sure they understand that the rules are there to protect them and their neighbors, has helped reduce the activity.

"The biggest challenge that we typically have is keeping people educated," said Gearhart. "A lot of people don't remember what it took to get here."

Lake's air basin gets help from coastal breezes, which can push out smoke and other particulate, but Gearhart doesn't think that factor is a major one in determining local air quality. He pointed to Mendocino and Sonoma counties, which are on the coast but whose air quality isn't as good as Lake County's.

The Lake County Air Quality Management District, which has four full-time staffers and several part-timers, monitors air quality year-round, said Gearhart.

The majority of the district's funding coming from permits — especially industry such as geothermal and gas stations. Gearhart said the district also receives funding from the state to enforce state air toxic control measures with a small amount of funding from the Environmental Protection Agency for specific monitoring.

"Our resources are fine," he said. "We're not feeling the same pinch that most agencies are feeling. We're just feeling delays when we deal with the state, but our funding sources are still there, are still present."

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