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Good Air—Bad Press

Six pollutants regulated under the Clean Air Act show that air quality is probably the greatest environmental success story of the last generation. The number of days in "exceedence" of the EPA's air quality standards has declined nearly 50 percent over the last decade, with a 60 percent drop in California alone.[1] All of this in spite of the fact that from 1970 to 2001 the U.S. economy grew 161 percent, auto travel increased by 149 percent, and total U.S. energy consumption increased 42 percent, reports Steven Hayward in his 2003 Index of Environmental Indicators.[2]

Yet, an American Lung Association (ALA) study gave a failing grade on air quality to more than half the nation's counties. As Ben Lieberman reports: "It's findings, while widely and uncritically reported by the popular press, are at odds with the data and more credible sources. Dozens of local news outlets took the bait, reporting their city or county had received an air quality 'F.' Nationally, the media coverage accepted the ALA's verdict on air as fact, and few questioned why the advocacy group's conclusions differ from those reached by the EPA."[3]

Other Groups Enter Fray

ALA isn't alone since others entered the fray. As Steven Hayward reports: "The U.S. Public Interest Research Group (USPIRG) releases its own study ('Danger in the Air') each year, a month after the Lung Association, that uses an identical methodology. Yet the media never seems to notice it is the same study as the ALA. It produces a second round of identical stories about worsening smog that are little more than rewrites of the USPRIG's press release."[4]

My home town of Livermore, California was one of the many places that got a grade of 'F' in an ALA report. Fortunately for Livermore, we had a reporter who took the time to get all the facts. Here's what Tim Hunt came up with. "The 'F' grade was based on 61 hours that exceeded the federal ozone standard since 1981. In other words, 61 times for one hour in 21 years the area was not in compliance with a conservative federal standard. So, there were 7,704 days that were in compliance or 183,899 hours that met the standard." Hunt goes on to add: "Was the lung association reaching a bit? Or exaggerating enough to make Pinocchio's nose span the Bay Bridge? The ratings made headlines that were backwards. The key point is how much we do comply, 99.997 percent of the time."[5] For those not familiar with the Bay Bridge, it's 2.1 miles long, a very long nose for Pinocchio, but a quite appropriate description for ALA's data dredging.

San Diego also got an 'F' for air quality but I'm not aware that they had reporters as intrepid as Tim Hunt of Livermore, so most of the folks in the area probably think they are in trouble. ALA claimed that San Diego had 16 exceedences per year of the EPA ozone standard. The reality is that only a single rural location, Alpine, exceeded the eight hour standard more than two times per year. Never mind the fact that 99.7 percent of all folks in San Diego County breathe air that meets both the EPA eight hour and one hour ozone standards.[6]

There are six so called 'criteria pollutants' regulated under the 1970 Clean Air Act—sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, particulate matter, lead, and ozone. Ambient levels of all of these except ozone have fallen markedly, according to the EPA. Ozone has fallen as well, but not as dramatically as the others, so it's the obvious candidate to pick on if you want to create some fuss.[3]

What About Ozone?

How bad are the data for ozone. Here's what Joel Schwartz reports: "San Bernardino, CA, the smoggiest area of the country, exceeded federal health standards for ozone smog on more than 130 days per year during the 1980s. Today, that number is down to around 15 to 30 times per year and dropping. That success was repeated across the nation. Of the more than 1,000 government ozone monitoring sites, only 46 percent met federal health standards in the early 1980s. Today 86 percent meet the standards. Those gains occurred at the same time that Americans increased their automobile use by 75 percent."[7]

Don't know about you, but this sounds like a major improvement to me. And this should continue. One reason is turnover of the auto fleet, including SUVs, to newer vehicles with vastly lower emission rates than older cars and trucks. Here are some data from a study done on automobile exhausts from cars passing through the Caldecott tunnel through the Oakland hills in northern California. Between 1994 and 2001 carbon monoxide emissions declined 62 percent, nitrogen oxides fell 49 percent, non-methane organic compounds (ozone precursors) fell 67 percent, and benzene fell 82 percent. These declines occurred even though the number of SUVs passing through the tunnel increased from 31 percent of all autos in 1994 to 38 percent in 2001.[8] Hayward reports the authors conclusions: "Fleet turnover appears to have had a greater overall impact on emissions than fuel changes for most pollutants. The reduction in emissions due to replacement of old vehicles with less polluting new vehicles is expected to continue." Similar data were also obtained for Chicago and Denver sites.[9]

Air Pollution Will Continue to Decline

Joel Schwartz observes: "Claims that air quality will decline in the future are not only incorrect, they are the polar opposite

of what will actually occur. Emissions from motor vehicles will continue to fall by several percent per year and will be more than 80 percent below current levels within the next 20 years. Likewise, power plant and industrial emissions will continue to decline simply as a result of continuing implementation of existing laws and regulations. Together, these sources account for more than three-fourths of ozone and PM-forming pollution. The only way air pollution could increase is if emissions from all other sources increased by at least a few hundred percent—a prospect that is absurd on its face and completely at odds with historical data showing declines in most emissions sources over time, because of both regulations and technological advancements.

"More generally, public debate on air pollution policy is being driven by the false premise that air pollution will rise unless we redouble our efforts to reduce it. In reality, no one can stop continued improvements in air quality in America. There is truly no way back to the smog levels of yesterday.[10]

"This will happen because older vehicles are being continually replaced by more recent models that stay cleaner throughout their lives. Because most NO_x and VOC pollution comes from motor vehicles, these virtually unstoppable reductions in vehicle pollution are enough by themselves to keep air pollution in retreat for years to come."[11] Schwartz goes on to point out that since average vehicle emission rates are declining more rapidly (five to 15 percent per year due to fleet turnover) while driving is increasing less than two percent per year, "total vehicle emissions will continue to decline in spite of population growth, suburbanization, and other trends toward increased driving." ***P&SF***

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