The South Coast Air Quality Management District is the agency responsible for attaining state and federal clean air standards in the South Coast Air Basin. All of California is divided into air basins, which are served by either county air pollution control districts or multi-county air quality management districts.

Air pollution tends to stagnate within these air basins due to natural barriers, such as mountains, unless prevailing winds are strong enough to disperse it into other areas. In 1977, the California Legislature created the South Coast AQMD by merging the air pollution control districts of the four counties sharing the South Coast Air Basin. This basin includes portions of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties and all of Orange County. Within Riverside County, the AQMD also has jurisdiction over the Salton Sea Air Basin and a portion of the Mojave Desert Air Basin.

The map at right depicts Southern California Air Basins, with the South Coast AQMD in blue. Thus, the South Coast Air Basin covers an area of 6,745 square miles with a population of 14.6 million, while the larger South Coast district boundary includes 10,743 square miles and a population of 15 million.