

Op-Ed (published by the Southern California News Group): COVID-19 orders provide a short relief from the full impacts of air pollution, but South Coast AQMD is not on a hiatus

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As we continue to adjust to life during the COVID-19 pandemic, with our lives turned upside down and our newsfeeds flooded with negative stories, there seems to be one silver lining: cleaner air. Dozens of reports are flooding in claiming at least a temporary victory in our fight for clean air. While it is true that the Greater Los Angeles area has seen one of the longest stretches of clean air in recent history, Angelenos may be noticing a temporary relief from bad air quality, one that is not a cause for celebration.

There is no doubt that the recent COVID-19 Stay-at-Home orders have played a part. Having fewer cars and diesel trucks on the road undoubtedly lead to fewer emissions. But, the science shows us that weather is playing an even bigger role in this recent period of clean air. March and April have brought an unusual amount of wet and windy weather to our region, conditions which are known to reduce pollution levels. Soon, the weather will change, and the air quality will return to more typical levels. But we can't wait until that time to be reminded of the work that still needs to be done to protect us from the harmful effects of air pollution.

Today, the American Lung Association (ALA) will release its annual State of the Air Report that grades counties in the United States based on air pollution levels, specifically ozone (smog) and fine particulate matter. Los Angeles will again be among the worst in the nation.

Here at the South Coast Air Quality Management District (South Coast AQMD), which serves Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange counties, we know that our unique combination of topography, weather, large population, and a robust goods movement industry create the perfect crucible to form air pollution. While there have been fewer cars and diesel trucks on the road in the past few weeks, the demand for goods is still high. Now is the time to accelerate the transition to cleaner technologies for mobile sources such as trucks, trains and ships, which cause the bulk of the pollution in our region.

South Coast AQMD has been hard at work passing the strictest regulations in the country on the stationary sources we regulate such as factories, refineries, and power plants. While our authority over mobile sources is limited, we invest millions in developing and deploying cleaner mobile source technologies. These efforts have yielded positive results. In fact, 2019 was the cleanest year on record for fine particulate matter (PM2.5). Levels of PM2.5 have dropped by more than half since measurements began 20 years ago. Ozone levels have declined significantly with nearly an 80% reduction since the 1950s. We project that nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions, a precursor to smog and PM2.5, have shrunk from over 1200 tons per day in the year 2000 to only 350 tons this year.

Our agency has proven that with the right regulations, funding, and partnerships with communities, businesses, and state, local and federal governments, improving air quality and eventually achieving zero emissions is possible. However, we see that not all communities benefit equally. Disadvantaged communities suffer disproportionate adverse impacts such as asthma, and other respiratory illnesses from poor air quality and we see that compounded in light of the COVID-19 crisis. Preliminary reports

from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have pointed out that those with certain underlying health conditions are more likely to have serious complications from COVID-19. This pandemic shows us that It's more important than ever to invest in our disadvantaged communities. Unfortunately, the state's budget unveiled in January is proposing to cut \$135 million from the clean transportation budget.

The state's budget also proposes to cut funding for the Assembly Bill 617 (AB 617) program that addresses air pollution in disadvantaged communities most impacted by air pollution.

While our region may be getting a short relief from the full impacts of air pollution, South Coast AQMD is not on a hiatus. We are continuing our work to clean the air so that the good air quality days we are seeing now can become the norm when the orders are lifted as our economy makes a comeback.

Wayne Nastri is the Executive Officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.