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Pollution report plays numbers game[IMAGE]

[IMAGE]

By Joel Schwartz

[IMAGE]

For decades, Americans have relied on the American Lung Association for reliable information on respiratory health. But in its "State of the Air 2003" report, the association vastly exaggerates air pollution levels and falsely claims that half of all Americans breathe air that puts them at risk.

The truth is, air pollution has been declining for decades, and already-adopted regulations will reduce vehicle emissions - the major source of smog - by 90 percent over the next 20 years.

How did one of the nation's foremost public health charities get the numbers so wrong?

Rather than basing its study on actual air pollution levels and risks, the association used Enron-like accounting.

Here's how: Many counties monitor ozone at several locations because pollution levels vary from place to place. Taking Los Angeles County as an example, ozone could be high one day in Glendora and then high the next day in Santa Clarita, 50 miles away. In this situation, the report counts two bad-air days for the entire county, even though people in Glendora and Santa Clarita each experienced only one such day, and the other 8 million people in the county enjoyed clean air on both days.

Thus the report manages to claim Los Angeles County averages 35 bad air days per year, even though a direct inspection of the EPA monitoring data shows that Santa Clarita - the worst location - had 25 elevated-ozone days per year, while the average location had just seven elevated days - 80 percent less than the report claims.

Indeed, Long Beach, West Los Angeles, Hawthorne and Lynwood - the most densely populated areas of the county - had clean air every day of the year, yet the American Lung Association gave their air a grade of F. Even for areas with frequent high ozone levels, the grades bear little relation to actual health risk. The grades are based on the Environmental Protection Agency's stringent new "eight-hour ozone standard," which is replacing the current "one-hour standard."

Although the eight-hour standard is significantly tougher, the EPA itself estimates that reducing ozone levels from the current standard to the new standard would reduce emergency room visits for asthma by only 0.6 percent. The effect is so small because, as epidemiological studies show, current air pollution levels are low enough that air pollution accounts for at most a few percent of all respiratory distress.

Almost 90 percent of the country already has air meeting the one-hour ozone standard. Yet between the phony grading system and "pollution inflation," the report makes the false claim that half of all Americans breathe air that puts them at risk.

The fight against smog is actually turning into a great success story in environmental protection. According to the EPA, ozone levels decreased by an average of about 24 percent nationwide between 1980 and 2000.

Southern California, the region with the worst air in the country, reduced its annual violations of the EPA's one-hour ozone standard by about 80 percent between 1980 and 2001.

Houston, the second most polluted area in the country, reduced ozone violations by about 60 percent during the same period. These gains occurred at the same time Americans increased their driving by 75 percent.

Readers of the State of the Air report would never know these facts. Instead, the American Lung Association claims America has made little progress on air pollution, and that air pollution will increase without new regulations.

Just the opposite is the case.

Already-adopted EPA regulations for 2004 and beyond require unprecedented reductions in automobile emissions. A fleet meeting the 2004 standards over its lifetime would be 90 percent cleaner than the average vehicle on the road today.

Similar standards go into effect in 2007 for diesel trucks.

This means that most air pollution will disappear during the next 20 years, as the fleet turns over to these advanced-technology vehicles.

False claims about pollution generate alarming headlines, but ironically, the American Lung Association's efforts could actually end up reducing Americans' overall health.

This fear-mongering will encourage the public to demand unnecessary expenditures to clean up air that is already clean and new regulations to reduce emissions that will be eliminated by already-adopted measures.

In a world of limited resources, society can address only some of the many risks people face. When we waste effort on small or nonexistent risks, fewer real problems get the attention they deserve.

"If you torture the data enough, it will confess to anything," goes a cautionary statistics joke. The State of the Air report seems to have adopted this maxim without a trace of irony.

Joel Schwartz is a senior fellow at Reason Foundation and a former environmental scientist for the California State Legislative Analyst's Office and the South Coast Air Quality Management District. He is author of the forthcoming study "No Way Back: Why Air Pollution Will Continue to Decline."