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Report: Central Valley Makes Modest Environmental Improvements

UC Merced and the Great Valley Center release environmental indicators report showing some progress, though ozone levels still surpass state and federal air quality standards

MODESTO, Calif. — California's Central Valley environment is getting healthier, but not fast enough. Its air quality is still among the worst in the nation, according to a report released today.

The Sierra Nevada Research Institute at the University of California, Merced, and The Great Valley Center jointly produced "The State of the Great Central Valley: Assessing the Region Via Indicators – The Environment 2006-2011."

The report tracks a variety of environmental indicators within the Central Valley and shows mixed results.

The good news is there has been a reduction in the level of a number of key air quality indicators, a recharge of watersheds to near normal levels, a slowing in the loss of prime agricultural land to urbanization and an increased restoration of wetland habitats.

Quick Facts

- UC Merced and the Great Valley Center released a report that tracks a variety of environmental indicators in the Central Valley.
- The report shows some gains, though more needs to be done to improve the area's environment.
- The Central Valley has seen a reduction in a number of key air quality indicators, though ozone levels still fall above state and federal standards.

The Central Valley's depressed economy has dramatically slowed the use of prime land for new homes and commercial space. It has also given local and regional governments time to prepare and begin using blueprints to improve urban housing density and transportation choices.

However, the Central Valley has many red flags when it comes to the environment.

The number of days ozone levels were above state and federal air quality standards has increased overall since 2005, and almost all counties in the region are not meeting the one-hour and eight-hour air quality standards for many days each year. The percentage of the Valley's population at risk for respiratory problems because of poor air quality outpaces other California regions.

The level of nitrates in drinking water has increased because farmers are using nitrogen-based fertilizers and planting nitrogen-fixing cover crops. Poor soil drainage has caused damage to fragile ecosystems. A great deal of energy is being used to move waste materials to landfills, presenting an opportunity for more recycling. Many counties have not reduced their waste production or energy consumption. In some cases, the numbers have increased beyond the proportional rise in population.

"We are impacted every day by the air we breathe, the water we drink, and how we use and develop Central Valley land," Great Valley Center Executive Director Dejeuné Shelton said. "There are long-term consequences for many of the resource decisions being made today -- choices that have an effect on our economy, health and society as a whole. Taking a closer look at the Central Valley's environmental data is pivotal to the Valley's future."

Gathering the data for this year's report was challenging because of state and local budget cuts that limited the collection of information and the monitoring of air, water, species diversity, habitat conservation and resource management.

Among the five recommendations for future action: Increase data gathering and improve sharing information, and support renewable energy sources for sustainable growth.

The report tracks environmental indicators as they relate to carbon monoxide, ozone and particulate matter; water quality and levels in our watersheds; pesticide use, soil drainage and land use; species of concern, fish, birds and wetland habitats; and waste production and energy consumption. It features a public policy essay by UC Merced engineering Professor Roger Bales, director of the Sierra Nevada Research Institute, on the need for a sustainable water supply to meet the growing needs of the expanding

Central Valley population with the additional stresses of climate change. It also profiles half a dozen successful efforts to conserve and build capacity for the future.

"The State of the Great Central Valley: The Environment (Third Edition)" is created by the Great Valley Center in collaboration with the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at UC Merced and is sponsored by the AT&T Foundation. It is an ongoing regional initiative tracking conditions in one of California's fastest growing regions: the 19-county Great Central Valley.

The data presented in the report are a snapshot of information providing tools for measuring the community well-being of the Valley. This third edition revisits indicators introduced in 2001 and revised in 2005, and includes several new ones. The data sets, which underlie and correlate with many of the other assessments of regional well-being, are grouped in sections describing air, water, land use, species and habitat, and resources and energy.

The report is available online at
www.greatvalley.org/work/environmentalindicators.pdf

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Founded in 1997, the [Great Valley Center](http://www.greatvalley.org) is a private, nonprofit organization that supports organizations and activities working to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of California's Central Valley. For more information, visit www.greatvalley.org.

[UC Merced](http://www.ucmerced.edu) opened Sept. 5, 2005, as the 10th campus in the University of California system and the first American research university of the 21st century. The campus significantly expands access to the UC system for students throughout the state, with a special mission to increase college-going rates among students in the San Joaquin Valley. It also serves as a major base of advanced research and as a stimulus to economic growth and diversification throughout the region. Situated near Yosemite National Park, the university is expected to grow rapidly, topping out at about 25,000 students within 30 years.

The [Sierra Nevada Research Institute](http://www.sierranv.org) focuses on discovering and disseminating new knowledge that contributes to sustain natural resources and promote social well-being in the Sierra Nevada and surrounding valleys and related regions worldwide. SNRI research is aimed at understanding and predicting changes that result from climate warming, land cover changes, population pressure and interacting forces.

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