

On this date, September 22, in 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global warning that air pollution causes seven million premature deaths annually, a threat on par with smoking and poor diet, and released updated, stricter air quality guidelines to reduce exposure and save lives. The updated guidelines lowered recommended limits for key pollutants and highlighted the need for global action to reduce emissions from fossil fuels and transition to clean energy.

Common causes of premature death from outdoor air pollution include ischemic heart disease and stroke. In children, exposure can lead to reduced lung growth and function, respiratory infections, and aggravated asthma. About one in six children in the San Joaquin Valley have asthma (the highest recorded in the state) and the asthma prevalence across the Valley has reached as high as twenty percent in school age children. Emerging evidence also links air pollution to other health issues like diabetes and neurodegenerative conditions.

San Joaquin Valley which is the most agriculturally productive region in the world, is also a region of deep and concentrated poverty and food insecurity. This valley is known to be the most polluted air basin for fine particles which on inhalation causes severe respiratory. It also accounts for the second worst air quality region in the United States.

Some of the main causes of air pollution are agriculture, oil drilling operations, large industries, and heavy traffic along Interstate 5, and Highway 99 .

The communities most affected by adverse health effects from environmental pollution are primarily Black and Latino. This is mainly because these neighborhoods are home to distribution warehouses with idling diesel trucks that add more particulate matter to the thick smoggy haze from nearby highways. The car and truck emissions in the San Joaquin valley constitute about half of the measured airborne particulate matter PM2.5 and the other half is made up of local sources such as wood, smoke and dust.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) views the environment as a divine gift to be stewarded, not exploited. Rooted in scripture, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of human dignity, justice, and the natural world, viewing environmental harm as a sin and a violation of justice. Key documents like Pope Francis's "Laudato Si'" call for an "ecological conversion" and "integral ecology," advocating for responsible stewardship, the common good, and solidarity with future generations and the poor who are often disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. The Earth and its resources are a common heritage meant to benefit all people, not just a privileged few.

Since 2005, the Environmental Justice Program (EJ) of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton has used its unique Catholic voice to improve air quality, lower carbon emissions, advocate for sustainable community growth and reduce the impacts of climate change in the San Joaquin Valley. We are particularly concerned with how these environmental challenges harm poor and vulnerable communities. The EJ Program works in both San Joaquin and Stanislaus County.

Since January 2025, the federal administration has initiated significant budget cuts and policy changes to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), targeting its budget, staffing, and regulatory authority. The new administration began this process on day one with executive orders that reverse prior environmental protection policies.

Catholic Charities refuses to succumb to these challenges. With the generous support of our community we will strive to continue to advocate for our local environment and take actions to improve the environmental health of our region.