California officials and residents take justifiable pride in the state’s continued leadership when it comes to controlling greenhouse gas emissions. But a recent report by the American Lung Association demonstrates that California still has a long, long way to go in addressing conventional air pollutants–especially in Southern California.

According to the American Lung Association’s just-issued State of the Air survey, Kern County in California’s San Joaquin Valley had the worst levels of fine particulate pollution in the nation last year — a toxic mix of soot, diesel exhaust, chemicals, metals and aerosols that contributes to heart attacks, stroke and lung disease. Kern County has the dubious distinction of displacing Los Angeles as the nation’s premier offender when it comes to particulate pollution. Particulate matter is a direct cause of asthma levels in children and the elderly that, alas, are also among the worst in the nation.

And things aren’t significantly better in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. True, L.A. “improved” to only the third-worst region in the U.S. for particulate matter pollution levels in 2008. But the Lung Association reports that Southern California retained its number one ranking as the country’s worst ozone-polluted metropolitan area. Ozone, like particulate matter, is a major cause of respiratory disease.

As California continues to make progress on the climate change front, federal, state and regional air quality officials can’t lose sight of the fact that conventional air pollution–and its attendant public health consequences–remains a major, unresolved environmental challenge for Southern California.