

Farmers are earth friendly

By Don Curlee, California Farming

In The Visalia Times-Delta

Sept. 29, 2003

In the good ol' days before militant environmentalists began blaming farmers for threats to the soil, the water and a long list of little-known creatures farmers often thought of themselves as the original environmentalists. That image is beginning to reappear stronger than ever.

Consider the experience of Paramount Farming Co., the huge citrus, nut and pomegranate producer headquartered in Kern County. Because many of its remote farm acres are habitat for the San Joaquin kit fox, the company has built dens for the endangered animal from irrigation pipe and other materials to protect it from predators such as coyotes, red foxes and golden eagles.

Paramount cooperated with a wildlife biologist at California State University, Stanislaus, and a representative of the Environmental Defense Fund to create the sanctuaries for the kit fox, which is smaller than the average house cat.

But the way had to be cleared by a special Safe Harbor Agreement adopted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1995. It absolves Paramount of any unintentional damage to endangered species that occupy its property. Prior to the agreement environmentally biased regulations had become so restrictive that farmers dared not encourage endangered species to occupy or propagate on their lands. Inadvertent endangerment of the creatures by farm equipment or chemical applications might cost them the use of their land.

Since enactment of the agreement some 200 landowners in various parts of the country have been improving habitat and helping recover a wide variety of endangered plants and animals in forests and on rangeland.

In Geyserville in Sonoma County, 18 wine grape growers received certificates last month designating them as certified fish friendly farmers. The certification covered 20 different properties totaling about 10,000 acres.

It is one of several conservation programs encouraged by the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, and has the potential of becoming state-wide. The growers make adjustments in irrigation practices and their use of chemicals to ensure that runoff will not endanger fish in neighboring streams and rivers.

In Sacramento County, rice grower Allen Garcia has adjusted his cultural practices in several ways to provide what he calls a bed and breakfast for ducks. By flooding his fields in winter he creates an inviting habitat for the ducks and other waterfowl.

They respond inadvertently by helping to break down the residue of rice straw remaining after harvest. Garcia doesn't begrudge them the generous amount of rice they enjoy prior to harvest; he even leaves some acreage unharvested to provide a late-season treat.

And the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association reported recently that its encouragement of integrated pest management and other environmentally sensitive practices has resulted in a steady decline in the use of pesticides.

When environmentalists back off enough to allow farmers to express their natural love for the environment and its creatures everybody seems to benefit, especially those cute little kit foxes.

[Letter to The \(Stockton\) Record, Sept. 29, 2003:](#)

Clearing the almond dust

It's almond-harvesting season in the San Joaquin Valley, and time for the annual dust bowl.

Almond growers compete to see who can create the largest clouds of dust.

Harvesters use a brush to sweep almonds off the ground. This raises huge dust clouds that can be seen for more than a mile.

When there's no wind, the dust spreads out at ground level like an amoeba.

My house is assaulted regularly by dust clouds from an orchard that's a quarter-mile away. The dust also creates zero visibility along roadways. Driving under such conditions is scary and potentially dangerous.

Writer Joan Didion, a native of the Central Valley, wrote in her memoir, "we live in dusty houses."

Why make it worse? There must be an effective way of harvesting almonds without creating such massive air pollution. I long for days in September or October when the entire horizon isn't filled with a brown haze.

Roger Winslow, Manteca

S.J. holds environmental-justice forum County leaders, community focus on future

By Linda Hughes-Kirchubel, (Stockton) Record Staff Writer

Sept. 28, 2003

Community leaders met Saturday to discuss the future needs of San Joaquin County, paying special attention to housing, transportation and the environment.

The San Joaquin Council of Governments, a regional transportation-planning agency, and Oasis of Hope, a faith-based nonprofit organization, sponsored the county's first environmental justice forum. About 40 people attended.

"We're partnering with Oasis ... trying to build lines of communication, and the best way for us to do this is to team with organizations like Oasis who are already there and know more about the community than we will ever know," said Andrew Chesley, COG's deputy executive director. "Hopefully, we'll get there."

Environmental justice refers to the right of all people to have safe and affordable housing and access to transportation, regardless of race, income levels or ethnicity. Mandated by federal law, it is the goal of agencies tasked with dispensing federal dollars to pay for transportation, housing and environmental needs.

Next year, COG is responsible for parceling out more than \$2.5 billion worth of transportation investments in San Joaquin County. Should that money improve roads? Pay for more buses? Widen lanes along the often-constricted Highway 99?

The aim of Saturday's forum: to solicit input from the community on San Joaquin County's unmet needs, targeting those who COG should consider when prioritizing future projects and funds.

It's a concept that has worked in the past, said Bobby Bivens, a community activist and past president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"As a result of input from the citizens, the buses have now done some rerouting so people can get around faster," he said.

The forum began with presentations and ended after participants gathered in small groups to share and brainstorm on transportation, environmental and housing issues.

Roungthip Baccam, who works at Head Start, said one of the biggest problems the county faces is the lack of affordable housing for low-, moderate- and medium-income people.

"There aren't enough vouchers," she said. "And even with vouchers, it's still not affordable."

She added that many people are poorly educated about credit, how to buy a house and how to save for a down payment.

"If you've never had a family member purchase a home, where do you start?" she asked. "Who is your role model?"

Mary McDonough of the Federal Highway Administration Research Center in Chicago spoke about the ways government agencies can better solicit input from communities to reach better solutions on how to spend tax dollars.

"It's about being fair to people," she said. "Fairness is where projects go, who gets the money and who gets the priority."

And she said she thinks such events as Saturday's forum are excellent ways for bureaucrats to reconnect with the people for whom they are working.

"It helps when the agencies take the citizens' concerns seriously," she said. "The citizens also have to take responsibility for holding the agency accountable for its decisions."

[The \(Stockton\) Record editorial, Sept. 28, 2003:](#)

Going to extremes

While it's not fair that San Joaquin County has been lumped in with more polluted regions, our air still needs cleaning up

The irony just kind of hangs in the ... well, it hangs in the air.

On Sept. 18, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board voted 6-3 to kill a proposed study on how San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties could split from the rest of the district's more-polluted southern counties.

Five days later, the pollution-control district sent out an advisory that smog levels were expected to reach unusually high levels. Residents were warned to avoid strenuous outside activity.

Where was the smog expected to be the worst?

Down south, in Fresno and Kern counties, with the possibility of levels that would necessitate formal public health advisories.

The northern part of the district? Nothing nearly as severe was predicted.

Irony notwithstanding, the northern counties didn't have the votes needed for a split. So businesses and farms won't be able to avoid costly regulations when the district moves into the "extreme" category, making it a bedfellow with the Los Angeles area.

A vote on that designation is expected in the next few months.

The northerners put up a noble fight, albeit a losing one.

Now, the three counties must face reality: an "extreme" designation will give the Valley until 2010 -- an extra five years -- to meet federal pollution limits. It also means much tighter regulations for businesses.

It's time to move on from the lost north-south battle.

The air in the northern part of the Valley, while not as severe as Fresno and Bakersfield, still is downright putrid and unbreathable at times. Childhood asthma rates continue to skyrocket.

There is much more to be fixed than there is to be avoided.

Gov. Gray Davis on Monday signed into law a package of helpful bills guided through the legislature by Rep. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, that focus on the Valley's air pollution.

The legislation:

- * Ends the agriculture industry's exemption from federal clean-air laws. Farm polluters must apply for permits.
- * Provides \$6 million for the Valley's biomass plants to help phase out agricultural burning.
- * Gives law enforcement agencies power to ticket "gross-polluting" cars.
- * Requires cities and counties to amend their general plans to include goals, policies and strategies for improving air quality. Rep. Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno, sponsored this bill.

Farmers and some businesses will squawk at the new rules, and it remains to be seen if they're laws with real teeth.

Progress must be made in improving air quality, or the quality of life will spiral downward in the Central Valley.

"I think the people of the Valley have spoken through their representatives in Sacramento, and they have said, 'Enough,' " said Winston Hickox, secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency.

[Letter to The Modesto Bee, Sept. 28, 2003:](#)

Publish air quality index numbers

I was disturbed by the article "Valley gags through late smog attack" (Sept. 24), but I found the air quality index numbers very important. Why doesn't The Bee publish the AQI numbers every day on its weather page?

The Bee's editorial board has taken a strong stance in favor of clean air, but you would never know this reading the weather page. The oversimplified graphic for air quality now reads like an idiot light on a car dashboard, and as long as it doesn't go into the danger zone readers pay too little attention. The Bee should also publish the AQI forecast on the front page, along with the daily high and low temperature.

Michael Smedshammer, Modesto

Efforts to clean up skies ongoing Five new laws for the Valley seen as just the start of a long battle.

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

(Published Monday, September 29, 2003, 5:34 AM)

For months, state Sen. Dean Florez pushed landmark air quality bills for the San Joaquin Valley through the Legislature without much fuss until one surprising committee vote in late August.

The Shafter Democrat collided with a roadblock for his cornerstone bill, Senate Bill 700, in the Appropriations Committee, where farm opponents persuaded Assembly members to stall the measure.

Suddenly, Florez and opponents locked in intense negotiations for almost 100 hours over more than a week.

When the unexpected nail-biting ended, an altered measure passed, though it still required replacements for all older farm diesel engines and pollution controls for large livestock operations.

With praise and optimism last week, Gov. Davis signed SB 700 and four other air-related bills.

Do these new laws mean 3.3 million residents can count on the Valley air to clear in time for the Fourth of July?

Not likely.

Florez, air regulators, farm officials and activists say it will take years to put the reforms into place.

As an example, the phase-out of farm-waste burning won't start until 2005, and it won't be complete until 2010.

Other laws will require new rules from local officials. And that takes many months, or sometimes years.

Indeed, Florez says the air pollution war has just begun in the Valley, the nation's second-most polluted place behind Los Angeles.

"We're going to hold a number of hearings -- monthly or at least quarterly -- to see how the laws are moving forward," says Florez, who chairs a Senate select committee on air pollution. "We're going to ask everyone involved how they are implementing the laws."

Activists agree. Sierra Club member Kevin Hall of Fresno adds: "The really hard work is in front of us. We're going to hold local politicians accountable like never before. Their work on air quality is going to equate to votes. That's the message."

Though the five laws may inspire more public scrutiny, the issues will be pretty familiar. They take on long-standing Valley issues, such as farm burning and urban sprawl.

SB 700 lifts the historical farm exemption from federal air operating permits.

SB 704 will provide about \$6 million for the next year to make it more affordable for biomass electricity plants to burn farm waste. Biomass plants are more than 95% cleaner than open-field farm waste burning, and they are a much preferred option.

SB 705 will phase out such open-field burning.

But one biomass plant official, Kent Duysen, owner of Sierra Forest Products in Terra Bella, says his industry needs more than a one-year infusion of money.

Biomass plants need long-term financial help because they cannot compete in the open market with other forms of electricity generation.

Without continued help, some plants will close, as they have in the past, he says.

"We're hopeful Senator Florez doesn't walk away," Duysen says. "We hope he makes sure this is done in a fair and equitable way."

Two other Florez bills also became law.

SB 708 will increase fines for owners of gross-polluting vehicles.

SB 709 will expand the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District authority to require car pools for large businesses and to levy fees for pollution from traffic at new developments.

The bottom-line question: How much pollution will the laws remove from the air?

Florez last week mistakenly said a 400- to 500-ton daily reduction was expected from farm sources.

He later said his estimate was several times higher than it should have been, but he clearly emphasizes the importance and size of the farm reductions.

Florez now says the farm air pollution reduction would eventually be about 77 tons a day.

The Valley air district confirms the numbers.

For perspective, the petroleum industry's massive cleanup in Kern County has removed more than 170 tons of smog-making gases daily over the last 12 years, according to California Air Resources Board statistics.

More than half of the Florez estimate for farm pollution reduction will come from controls now being assembled in the air district's PM-10 Plan.

PM-10 stands for particulate matter 10 microns wide or smaller -- tiny bits of dust, ash and chemicals.

A human hair is about 60 microns wide.

Farm officials don't dispute the importance of removing the farm permit exemption.

But they say SB 700 should have stopped at repealing the exemption. They say voluntary farm efforts already are covering the reductions included in the new law.

For instance, farmers have voluntarily replaced more than half of their old diesel engines, and they will replace many more, farm officials say.

They object that Florez is claiming about 11 tons per day of future pollution reductions from the replacement of such engines.

"Show me the reductions in emissions from SB 700 that aren't already occurring, or in the process of occurring," says Roger Isom, vice president and director of technical services for California Cotton Ginners and Growers Associations. "I truly believe that SB

700 will only serve to push farmers away from the table, and set back all we have gained in the last four years."

Florez says there is a big difference between the district's plans, which allow farmers to opt out of the restrictions, and SB 700.

"It's required now," Florez says. "It's not voluntary. Now it's not a question of will you do it? Now you must do it. Other industries are not given options to handle pollution-control voluntarily."

Many people might not realize that agriculture statewide will have to abide by the new rules, says Cynthia Cory of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

To implement the rules, more research will be needed to fill many gaps in knowledge about farm air emissions, she says.

Researchers are studying farms, but their work may take two years.

"When you have command and control, as we do now with SB 700, they're going to need better numbers to justify rules," Cory says. "What are the emissions? Who will have to implement controls? What will the most effective controls be?"

Those questions run through the minds of Valley air district officials, who will make rules that control emissions from farms.

Officials in the Valley and around California have not generally regulated agriculture in the past, so they are on a steep learning curve, they say.

"We are still studying the [Florez] bills to understand the details and spirit of the legislation," says air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. "We also have to lay the legislation against the framework of the Clean Air Act and our own [cleanup] plans."

The district has until July 2006 to come up with a rule on animal operations, such as dairies, says district lawyer Phillip Jay.

"Generally, it takes a year to get from the discussion to the rule," he says. "But it has taken longer, especially with a controversial issue. It's kind of hard to predict at this point."

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com or 441-6316.

Letters to the Bakersfield Californian, Sept. 29, 2003:

Dairies not our enemy

Why is it that people get so worked up about the relatively rare occurrence of a dairy moving close to a residential area yet never pay attention to the far more common occurrence of residential developments and schools moving close to existing dairies?

All of the Silver Lakes tract was built less than three miles from existing dairies, and two high schools, Stockdale and Ridgeview, were built less than three miles from existing dairies. And newer developments are going up every day even closer to dairies.

If the 2010 plan continues to be followed, existing dairies will find themselves inside the Bakersfield city limits! The only effective buffer zone would have to ban residential development and schools from moving close to dairies -- and even that would do nothing about the existing conflicts.

As I have said before, Tulare County's one mile buffer zone has worked for 30 years and is much more practical than a three mile zone.

People act as if nothing has changed in dairy manure management in 50 years. Today's dairies are graded and drained to prevent water from collecting in the pens. Manure is regularly removed from the pens. Parasites are used to control the flies. Chino's old dairies still have enormous odor and fly problems, but these have been greatly reduced on today's modern dairies.

And dairy runoff has been banned for many years. Several years ago a Central California dairy was fined over \$100,000 for allowing runoff. Any movement of manure off of the dairy premise now requires a permit.

ROBERT C. HARGREAVES, Bakersfield

Don't blame 'big oil'

Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante wants to cap gas prices because we are being gouged by the "big oil companies." That's called "price fixing" and it's against the law if you do it in your business. So, if it's OK for the California government to do it, let's also cap concert tickets, groceries, politician's salaries, cable TV and the cost of newspapers.

But let's keep this to gasoline gouging.

In California we pay more for gasoline (it costs more to make to meet legislative standards) that has less energy (less miles per gallon) so that old carbureted cars (rapidly disappearing pre-1992) built to run rich will pollute less. Electronic fuel injection sensors in newer cars detect the added oxygen and pump more fuel. This is why when traveling in the Midwest you often buy unoxygenated gasoline which cost less to make (about \$0.40 per gallon at the pump last May) and it increases gas mileage by as much as 25 percent compared to California. I think this is legislative gouging.

And don't you think paying sales tax on excise taxes is also a form of "gouging?"

Let's summarize. Californians apparently are paying about \$0.65 a gallon more than other places in America just because of government mandates. Even now, at these high prices, this is about a third of the price.

The next time you buy gas and think "big oil" is gouging again also think about "out of control government." Sacramento makes a much greater profit than the oil companies.

CONRAD HOWARD, Bakersfield

[Letters to the Bakersfield Californian, Sept. 28, 2003:](#)

Florez holds grudge against Nicole Parra

I live in the Loma, an older community in east Bakersfield. Many great people have come out of this part of town to assume prominent leadership roles. They represent all the trials and errors of growing up in a segregated, mostly Hispanic neighborhood.

I now live in this part of town with a new generation. Most of us speak English and can read and write. We can express our feelings now that we are American achievers. What we are is God's gift to us. What we become is our gift to God.

I am a single parent who works for a restaurant downtown. I am very proud of my job and that I have the ability to support myself. I plan to continue my education so one day I can be like my mentor, Nicole Parra. She has given me the motivation to be successful.

Nicole Parra's first term as the assemblywoman of the 30th District has been rough. She has become a role model in every Latina woman's life. There is hope out in the barrios.

Her accomplishments in her first year have been tremendous. She is this way because of her upbringing having a father who cares about family and community.

Her father has done more for the 5th District than any other supervisor before him. My main concern is why Sen. Dean Florez attacks Nicole Parra, instead of being a gentleman and trying to work together. Instead, he holds a grudge against her because he wanted Jim Crettol to be his successor.

This is how a child behaves. He can't even get along with his own colleagues in Sacramento. He should be a team player, working together can get more things done in the community.

STEPHANIE BLANCARTE, Bakersfield

Votes have been wasted

The air quality in Bakersfield is the third worst in the nation. As a result, we have many respiratory ailments. But we have many football games every Friday night.

Our state political leaders have permitted us to take on a deficit of \$38 billion. Many needed services have been eliminated. But we have many football games each Saturday.

Desert Counseling Center has cost taxpayers millions of dollars. Our county supervisors have been less than adequate. But we still have football games every Sunday.

Our supervisors have permitted dairies to be built in this area even though our county and our nation has more milk than it needs. But we have Monday Night Football.

Many schools in our community did not pass the Annual Yearly Progress tests. But we have many football games to watch each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Patrick Henry once said, "Taxation without representation is tyranny." Today he would likely say, "Taxation without adequate representation is gross stupidity."

In high-school, I was taught that football is king. As an adult, I focused so much on football that I ignored and neglected political events. I apologize to the people of Kern County for not making better use of my vote.

STAN KELKER, Bakersfield

When farms, houses collide

By TIM BRAGG, Bakersfield Californian staff writer
Saturday, September 27, 2003, 11:30:18 PM

Moving out to the suburbs to enjoy life near the countryside is practically a tradition in California.

But people who move there sometimes find the quiet and peace of the countryside comes with a few side effects.

With houses moving farther and farther away from Bakersfield's urban core, new neighborhoods are continually bumping up against land still being farmed.

Dust and strange smells are some of the by-products of farming. It caught people off guard.

"When they are harvesting, there's lots of dust," said Sarah Smith, a northwest Bakersfield resident who lives in a new neighborhood near an almond orchard.

"In the winter, we get a nice smell of manure in the air," she said. "It's not always nice."

But she acknowledges there are good things about living there, too.

"It's quiet, although it may not be that way for long," she said. "They're going to build an a high school and a shopping center over here pretty soon."

Every year, county agricultural officials receive complaints from people living in neighborhoods near agricultural fields, said Kern County Agricultural Commissioner Ted Davis.

The complaints often involve dust, smells or other problems.

"One of the biggest impacts we have on farming is leap-frog development," Davis said. "When you having farming going on between housing tracts, that's generally where you get the largest number of complaints."

Kern County does not have a "right to farm act" as some counties do, but Davis said real estate agents are required to disclose when homes are close to land where farming continues so home buyers understand the potential impacts on their lifestyle.

Being near a housing development can affect a farmer's ability to spray certain chemicals and pesticides, Davis said.

It also presents some other headaches, too.

Leonard Bidart, president of Bidart Brothers farming operations, said he doesn't mind people strolling through the almond fields and other farm land his company owns in northwest Bakersfield, as long as the company is not in the middle of a major operation like spraying or harvesting. One existing neighborhood and several new ones are encroaching on the Bidart land in the area of Snow and Coffee roads.

But what Bidart doesn't like are people who race through the property on motorcycles, ATVs or other vehicles that can cause significant damage.

He also doesn't like it when people discard their trash on the land instead of taking it to the dump, an activity becoming more and more common.

"Overall it's not bad, people like that we're here," Bidart said.

But living by people who do not share a farmer's point of view can be a challenge.

"We were trapping birds to keep them out of one of our vineyards, but a woman would always enter our property and release the birds," Bidart said.

"She'd break the lock or cut the wire cage, he said. "It's funny that people feel entitled to do that sort of thing on farm property. I doubt they would be so bold as to pull out the flowers at The Marketplace because they're allergic to them."

Bidart said encroaching development hasn't made him want to get out the farming business, but he said he can understand how other growers come to that decision giving the current situation for agriculture.

"The economics of farming are not great," he said. "The costs and regulatory burdens on farmers are increasing all the time."

Some people who live near farms say it would be a shame if other neighborhoods like theirs push the farms out for good.

But they also acknowledge that will ultimately happen as the city expands.

"It's nice and quiet out here, I hope that doesn't change," said Salvador Zamora, who lives in a neighbor near farm fields along Allen Road.

Spare the air

The Bakersfield Californian

Saturday, September 27, 2003, 11:30:18 PM

Spare the air today

Today has been declared a "Spare the Air" day in Kern County due to continued hot weather and high smog levels. Residents are urged to avoid unnecessary outdoor exertion, especially children, the elderly, and people with breathing difficulties.

Spare the Air conditions are declared by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District whenever the Air Quality Index is forecast to exceed 150. All residents are urged to curtail their driving, avoid using off-road vehicles and gas-powered landscaping equipment, and use public transportation to avoid contributing to the smog problem.

For more information, call 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit www.valleyair.org.

Opinion

Thumbs up, thumbs down

(Published in the Fresno Bee on Saturday, September 27, 2003, 5:05 AM)

[Thumbs down to the Valley's agriculture interests, which are determined to prove that it ain't over 'til they say it's over. The governor has just signed an important package of clean-air bills, some of which were mightily opposed by ag. Industry lobbyists wasted no time in trying to get legislation through Congress that would nullify the hard-fought gains the Valley just made against air pollution. Their first effort failed, but don't expect it to be the last.](#)

Thumbs up to Ruiz Food Products Inc. of Dinuba and Superior Services Inc. of Fresno for being honored last week by the U.S. Small Business Administration in Washington, D.C. Ruiz Food Products Inc. of Dinuba was inducted into the SBA's Golden Anniversary Hall of Fame, and Superior Services Inc. of Fresno earned an award as Prime Contractor of the Year in Region 9, an area representing California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii and Guam.

Thumbs up to Leslie Flores, 18, the first girl to play varsity football for Clovis West High School. Flores pursued her sport in her freshman year at Hollywood High. After moving to Clovis West as a sophomore, she shook off years of taunts from teammates and got significant playing time her junior year on the junior varsity team. This year attitudes have changed. She recently had her first varsity carry, a two-yard gain that drew a deafening cheer. She sets a fine example to young girls coming after her.

Thumbs up to Rudy Vargas, a former Marine, for painting Visalia's second mural honoring veterans. The mural, at the Visalia Convention Center, depicts a montage of an American flag, planes, ships and military members. The former Visalia Police SWAT team leader won a Medal of Valor for his role in pulling a wounded officer out of a shootout with a murder suspect in 1998. That officer was Vargas' friend, James Rapozo, who later died. Vargas' art hangs in the lobby of the Visalia Police Department, and he has painted posters for the Los Angeles and New York police departments.

Thumbs up to the Fresno County Board of Supervisors and Planning Department, Fig Garden Homeowners Association, Fresno Neighborhood Alliance and the Sunnyside Property Owners Association. The groups worked together for months to craft an ordinance that will accommodate a state mandate to allow affordable housing yet still protect neighborhood character. That's the way to solve community problems.

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, Sept. 24, 2003:](#)

Stricter smog rules welcomed

In the last few days, Merced's skyline has been just about at its all-time worst as far as smog is concerned. There's a dingy, dirty brown look to the horizon, a testament to a distinction this area really doesn't need - its poor air quality.

We should derive some satisfaction in knowing Gov. Gray Davis has signed five bills just approved by the state Legislature which ultimately should improve San Joaquin Valley air quality.

More needs to be done but it's not a moment too soon, considering Valley air is the second-filthiest anywhere in the United States. Nobody should be proud of this fact.

The new legislation includes removing agriculture's exemption from the federal Clean Air Act. Yes, it could involve some hardships to Valley farmers for a while but agriculturists are resourceful, inventive people who ultimately will find ways to get what they need done without harming the environment in the process.

In making ag follow the same pollution control regulations as other California industries, the state won't lose \$2 billion in federal highway funds which would be a catastrophe.

A longtime Valley farming ritual, agricultural burning, also goes by the wayside in the new legislation but there are alternatives, particularly developing and utilizing biomass facilities to process ag waste.

Along with the new ag restrictions, the package of air pollution regulations also tightens penalties for driving gross-polluting vehicles. There should be some consolation that those caught with a rolling "smoker" also are going to kick in for heightened pollution control efforts.

California Farm Bureau Federation officials say they hope to work closely with state and area pollution control representatives to ensure new ag regulations are fair and effective - with the bottom line hopefully being a return to blue skies for the Merced area as well as continued and prosperous ag production.

Here's where the input of local residents, farmers and ranchers will be needed so the outcome is satisfactory to all parties.

We hope the new pollution bills do help clear the air. We still think more needs to be done to promote cleaner-burning engines and less reliance on fossil fuel but that's apparently a slow-moving process.

If all parties work together, perhaps we'll be able to see the Sierra foothills sometime in this decade.