

News Release

For immediate release

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Valley achieves historic clean-air mark for smog

Air District to formally ask EPA to lift the \$29 million annual penalty mandate on Valley residents

For the first time in recorded history, the San Joaquin Valley in 2013 had zero violations of the hourly ozone standard established under the federal Clean Air Act. With the conclusion of the official ozone season that runs from March through October, the District will now submit a formal request to the federal Environmental Protection Agency to declare the Valley in attainment of the key standard and lift the \$29 million penalty mandate which Valley residents have been paying since late 2010.

Reaching this milestone has been the key focus of the Valley's air quality-management strategies for more than two decades. In 2004, EPA classified the Valley as "Extreme" non-attainment for this standard, meaning that reaching the standard, at that time, was deemed impossible. "Becoming the first and only region in the nation with 'Extreme' classification to meet the standard is an achievement the entire Valley should be very proud of," said Skip Barwick, chair of the Valley Air District's Governing Board.

In 1996, the Valley experienced 281 violations of this hourly standard throughout the eight-county region. The number of violations dropped to only seven in 2012 and zero in 2013.

Despite significant progress, Valley leaders were frustrated in 2010 when, under federal law, Valley residents and businesses became subject to an annual \$29 million penalty. At the time, the Air District crafted an alternative approach that kept these penalties from going to federal coffers. Under the alternative approach that was approved by EPA, the Valley was able to retain those dollars and invest them in the Valley's local economy to fund clean-air projects in the eight-county region. This alternative approach, however, is the subject of a lawsuit filed by a Bay Area environmental law firm seeking to impose additional penalties on Valley businesses. "This historic achievement will moot frivolous lawsuits, and returns full local control to the Valley over the need and the manner of expenditure of public funds for air pollution control," Barwick said.

The members of the Air District's Governing Board were unanimous in their appreciation of the enormity of this achievement, and in expressing their gratitude to Valley businesses and residents for their investments and sacrifice.

"Achieving this historic milestone provides a measurable return on the great investment and sacrifice that Valley businesses and residents have made. The return comes in the form of improved public health and quality of life for all Valley residents," said Hubert Walsh, Vice Chair of the District board and Merced County supervisor.

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Valley on threshold of historic achievement

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Page 2 of 3

"Valley businesses have been great partners with us in helping improve quality of life for Valley residents. This historic achievement would have been impossible without the billions of dollars that Valley businesses have spent in modernizing their facilities and reducing air pollution," said Judy Case, Air District Board member and Fresno County supervisor.

"When the Valley was classified as 'Extreme' nonattainment, many of us wondered if it was possible to achieve that standard, given our climate and geography. Yet, here we are a few short years later, attaining that standard," said Steve Worthley, Air District Board member and Tulare County supervisor. "Our families now enjoy air quality that is 80 percent better than when the district was formed in 1992. Our journey to cleaner air continues, but today marks a tremendous milestone."

"We achieved this great milestone because Valley farmers and dairy families have consistently proven to be great stewards of the environment and have done a lot more than their competitors throughout the nation and the rest of world to improve air quality," said Tony Barba, Air District Board member and Kings County supervisor.

"Valley residents have consistently ranked air quality as a primary area of concern and have risen to the occasion to do their part. The public's positive response and their efforts to reduce air pollution during Air Alerts was key to eliminating the last few violations that stayed in the way of the Valley meeting this critical standard," said William O'Brien, Air District Board member and Stanislaus County supervisor.

"This is an historic milestone achieved by a combination of regulation, incentives and voluntary actions. Valley businesses, the public, community and environmental advocates all contributed to achieving these goals. Some thought it couldn't be done, and the success is an important marker for us as we tackle even tougher standards with the goal of a more healthful Valley," said Dr. Alexander Sheriffs, a physician and a member of the Air District Board.

"The challenges that we face with respect to our air quality are unmatched by any other region in the nation. Once again, the ingenuity of Valley residents and businesses has made the impossible possible," said Tom Wheeler, Air District Board member and Madera County supervisor.

"People in every corner of the Valley have worked hard to help us achieve this goal, and we should celebrate our success and the cleaner air it represents," said Dennis Brazil, Board member and Mayor of the city of Gustine.

"Achieving this great milestone is especially gratifying because the Air District did not often prescribe to the one-size-fits-all solutions prescribed by special-interest groups that were not in the best interests of the Valley. We did it our best to balance Valley's economic and environmental interests, and it worked," said Harold Hanson, Air District Board member and councilmember from City of Bakersfield.

"The Air District is here to protect the health of Valley residents. This achievement illustrates not only the innovation and resourcefulness of the District, but also the understanding and participation of the Valley's businesses and people. Working together, there's nothing we can't accomplish," said Oliver Baines, Board member and Fresno City councilman.

For more information, visit www.valleyair.org or call a District office in Fresno (559-230-6000), Modesto (209-557-6400) or Bakersfield (661-392-5500).